

THE SALTED EARTH

by

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# The University of Utah Graduate School

## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The following faculty members served as the supervisory committee chair and members for the thesis of Eric Joseph Robertson.

Dates at right indicate the members' approval of the thesis.

<u>Robert S. Tatum</u>	, Chair	<u>5/14/2013</u> Date Approved
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<u>Terry Tempest Williams</u>	, Member	<u>5/14/2013</u> Date Approved
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The thesis has also been approved by Robert S. Tatum, Chair of the Department of Environmental Humanities and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

At the outset, my thesis appears fairly straightforward. I'm writing a novel about a single father raising nine children on a dry farm in a small conservative town. Simple enough. But the construction of a work of fiction is far from simple, especially as I write about queer bodies that have negotiated human ecology without recognizable myths and stories to guide their life journeys. So my signpost, the focus of this thesis, is the ecological metaphor. That thing we cannot live without. That thing that always only hints at what might be real. That thing that is always subject to change. This thesis hunts for new ecological metaphors and new ways to describe and figure human bodies.

How we talk about a queer body can do strange and marvelous things to the rethinking of ecological metaphor. In these stories there are metaphors old and new, religious and metaphysical, even metaphors pulled from relationships that exist but go unexamined. I don't intend for any one metaphor to stick and replace old ones. I merely explore the possibility of the queer body acting as (here comes the new metaphor) an ecotone—a place of mixing, composting, of radical interdisciplinary engagement. By opening a creative space to the rigors of scientific inquiry and the mysteries of our feral human imagination I hope to create stories couched not in any singular discursive register, but stories seething with uncertainty and a radical openness.

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David Luna—spoken words can only ever suggest the depth to which you influence my life. To Peggy and Mona, you cannot read this so I will just say this to myself—I am not human without you.

## PREFACE

The narrative connected to these stories focuses on the life of a dry farmer living in a religious town. Deverle Christensen has nine children, 500 acres of dry farmland, and a cold-water geyser that's just come to life at the edge of his property. He faces the end of the world, as he knows it. The story of his life as a single father, as a person of faith, and as a carrier of queer genetics, anchors seven sections that are selected chapters from a larger work of fiction entitled *The Salted Earth*. They comprise the body of this thesis.

These sections combine a fictional narrative that in part revolves around metaphors inspired from queer theoretical concepts and hypotheses from behavioral ecology. My research within these two very different disciplines focuses on the queer body and how it challenges established notions of human ecological interactions. This collection of fiction is my attempt to examine how religious metaphor defines and controls human bodies and their habitats and how reconfigured metaphors concerning queer human bodies are able to transgress and challenge that control. *The Salted Earth* is my attempt to creatively introduce new ecological metaphors, using *queer materialism* to challenge and transform how we imagine human materiality walking temporal landscapes.

In addition to these sections of fiction I include an afterword that serves two distinct purposes. On its own, it stands as a singular, queer eco-critical essay outlining key theoretical concepts from an interdisciplinary analysis of how metaphor shapes

ecological discourse. This essay also acts as a template for a much larger exploration of these ideas. It is expansive and it covers a lot of ground. I've kept the scope of this essay wide in order to assemble both a philosophical lineage and a theoretical community wherein there is a type of ecocritical kinship that holds an agreeable conceptual space for the ideas I explore within queer materialism.

There are two central questions I wish to address in the afterword. How does one figure the queer body inside current ecological studies? How do we talk about ecological consequence outside the old religious semioses that still haunt the ethics of environmental discourse? I feel it's time to disturb and dissect our social and ecological constructions based on *paradises, edens, resurrections, heavens* and *hells*.

The afterword provides a queer ecological rubric from which I conceive creative catalogues to imagine how new metaphors concerning nonprocreative bodies can potentially gain the capacity to produce powerfully transformative ecological and sociological niches. Hopefully, queer materialism emerges from this exploration not yet fully formed, but at least given its first breath. I would like to see this line of inquiry find a place in an emerging community of thought surrounding ecological studies.

One current focus in environmental discourse targets both the egregious ecological behavior of *Homo sapiens* and the failure of that species to reconceptualize its ecological storytelling in order to transform its destructive behavior. The philosophy of groups like the Black Mountain Project, whose membership includes the writers and poets David Abram, Mario Petrucci, Jay Griffiths, and Susan Richardson, illustrates a new trend within human-centered environmentalism: the pronouncement of human-centered environmentalism's miserable failure. The following statement comes from



noted British environmentalist Paul Kingsnorth, the group's founder, from his article "Dark Ecology," published in the latest issue of *Orion Magazine*:

The green movement, which seemed to be carrying all before it in the early 1990s, has plunged into a full-on midlife crisis. Unable to significantly change either the system or the behavior of the public, assailed by a rising movement of "skeptics" and by public boredom with being hectored about carbon and consumption, colonized by a new breed of corporate spivs for whom "sustainability" is just another opportunity for selling things, the greens are seeing a nasty realization dawn: despite all their work, their passion, their commitment and the fact that most of what they have been saying has been broadly right—they are losing. There is no likelihood of the world going their way. In most green circles now, sooner or later, the conversation comes round to the same question: what the hell do we do next?

*We're fallen and we can't get up.* That's one of the only stories that sticks. Why?

Authors like Wendell Berry, Alan Burdick, William Cronon as well as the great thinker Joseph Campbell all examine the "limits of metaphor," particularly the failure of religious metaphor to help humans create a healthier ecology. Joseph Campbell believed "a new mythology is rapidly becoming a necessity both socially and spiritually as the metaphors of the past, such as the Virgin Birth and the Promised Land, misread consequently as fact, lose their vitality and become concretized" (Campbell 6). These are metaphors that have lost their connections to a materiality that can potentially "make manifest the radiance of the world just as it is, rather than arguing it should be one way or the other" (6).

As a response to Kingsnorth's question, bolstered by the skepticism of Berry and Campbell, I offer these seven chapters from *The Salted Earth*. They are sites of exploration into the art of ecological storytelling and mythmaking. It may not be that environmentalism has failed. It may be that it has entered not its midlife crisis, as

Kingsnorth claims, but its adolescence. Environmentalism has come to the end of its beginning and its stories may need to mature.

I MICHAEL

*Evolutionarily, humans are a “mixed bag.”*

*Foragers, primates, mammals—human legacies spiral backward through time,  
Like the coils of DNA that connect us, linking us to long-ago forms.*

*A thrifty matron and inveterate recycler,  
Mother Nature is slow to discard leftovers.*

*Conservative retention of useful molecules explains why the same endorphins,  
the natural morphine that made the pain of my children’s birth bearable,  
are also released in an earthworm  
when my garden spade accidentally severs it.*

*Confronted with the necessity of solving a new problem,  
Mother Nature’s first, and typically only, recourse is to use  
what she has on hand.*

*Every living organism, every organ of every organism,  
not to mention tissues and molecules, whether or not they are still in use,  
bears the accumulated imprints of multiple past lives.  
Never permitted the luxury of starting from scratch  
to produce a perfect solution,  
natural selection recycles workable solutions for a  
“good-enough” fit.*

SARAH BLAFFER HRDY  
*primatologist*

Deverle never expected to see his oldest son again. Didn't even think about what he'd do if Michael showed up one day looking for food and money. So when Michael showed up one day looking for food and money, Deverle began making decisions without a plan. He had eight other kids in that house and Michael on drugs was no kind of example for them. Nobody had ever heard of the kinds of things this kid was taking. Most kids with problems in Lesley were drinkers. Deverle had been part of an ex-communication a few years back for the Jones grandkid who'd done heroin. Michael's business was altogether different. Eyeliner mascara and black-painted fingernails, split and chewed up. Lips dry and cracked, and when he talked it sounded as if he had teeth missing. Michael sat on that old brown sofa, the one with the middle springs broken. He bounced his knee up and down while Deverle shuffled the three youngest kids into the back yard. Deverle came into the front room and pulled a chair up in front of Michael and sat down. He thought of two very important things to say. But he thought better and didn't say either one of them. Then the kid started to cry. Soon the piercing in his nose dripped snot onto the already stained sofa. The black eye make-up bled down and covered the small teardrop tattoo under his left eye. A dead smell came out of Michael's mouth as he explained to Deverle where he had been for the last year. Much of his story was incoherent. His words were fat and soft and Deverle leaned in close not to listen but to see what shape Michael's teeth were in. But, Michael didn't open his mouth wide enough for Deverle to get a good look.

Deverle knew there was a long list of things he should do. Get the Mack brothers from down the road to come over with their consecrated oil. Get the Bishop to drive out to the farm if he had the time. Get Michael into Deverle's favorite recliner and put him in

the middle of the living room. They could all gather around him, men who loved him and lay their hands on his head and bless him and pray for him. Then they could sit a while and talk about the horses and the new dirt bike track and ask if Michael might like to come on the backpacking trip to Wyoming. Kimber Mack would ask him if he thought about playing ball again. Michael would say no and the conversation would end.

Instead of all that, Deverle sat quiet. He watched Michael pick off the last bits of a scab on his middle finger.

“What’d you do there?”

“Cut it.”

He read three of the four cuss words Michael had written on his jeans with black magic marker.

Well, I guess we can bring the trailer house over for you. We’ll park it over by the car port and run an extension cord out from the tool shed so you got some power. You’ll have your privacy.

Michael slumped over and lost consciousness. Deverle caught him before he hit the floor and laid him on the carpet. Michael’s jeans were soaked. He shit himself.

One of the three youngest of Deverle’s kids screamed from the backyard. Deverle could never tell if it was Peter, Alma, or Mary. They were all a year apart and sounded alike.

Deverle checked Michael’s pulse. It was fast and hard, but regular. Calling the hospital would complicate things. There wasn’t any money anyway to pay some college student just to tell Deverle that Michael needed to eat, get some rest, and clean up his life. Deverle put his hand across Michael’s forehead. It was cold and sweaty.

“Dad!”

Mary, Deverle’s youngest, threw open the screen door and let it slam behind her. She came in holding what looked like a dead gopher.

“Dad!”

“Hi, sweetheart.”

“Who’s that?”

“One of the neighbor boys.”

“Ugh!”

She stomped outside and continued screaming.

Deverle covered Michael’s forehead with his hand. He put it over Michael’s mouth and felt a labored breath roll out of his swollen nostrils. The piercing in his nose was cold.

Deverle had two thoughts, neither one of them repeatable.

He dragged Michael down the hall to the bathroom. Deverle’s back popped and was about to give out. Deverle quickly sat on the floor and flattened his back against the wall. The bones in his spine felt soft and porous. He leaned his son against the wall and shouted into his face. He slapped him and shook him. Deverle tapped the back of his head against the wall.

*You stupid son-of-bitch.*

“Michael. Come on son. Stand up for me.”

Michael lifted his head slightly. He sucked air through his teeth and spit into the vent in the floor. A small grunt and he fell forward. Deverle stood up and went into his bedroom. He dug through the bottom of his closet and found the old back belt he saved from his

days with his father's moving company. He let it out all the way for it to fit around his stomach. He sat on the corner of his bed and offered a brief prayer. I can't tell you what he said, but in answer to that prayer, he was given the following impression.

*Get Michael into the tub as quickly as you can. Lift with your legs. Keep your back straight. Mind how you speak to your daughter.*

He went into the bathroom and got all of the toys out of the bathtub. He removed all the good towels, and peeled off the green, carpeted, toilet lid cover. He threw out the matching bath mat and the plastic garbage can. He wrapped the shower curtain around the rod so it was up and out of the way. He thought about getting a bucket for puke but assumed there was nothing left in this kid's stomach.

He got behind Michael, squatted down and lifted with his legs. What a difference that back belt made. *Jensen and Son* had always provided very well engineered safety devices for its employees. Deverle had forgotten that fact. He resolved to use the back belt more often. He had a garage to build that summer and had given up on his morning push-ups.

He dragged Michael into the tiny bathroom. Michael strung together three muddled words that sounded like a question. Deverle laid him down on the bathroom floor. Michael's big feet stuck out into the hall. The rubber heels from his army surplus boots left two black streaks on the linoleum down the hallway.

Screams erupted from the backyard. Deverle stepped into the tub and threw open the bathroom window. Mary was standing on top of the doghouse.

"Mary?"

"Lanae's chickens are out again!"



“Where are your brothers?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where’s Jake?”

Her little brain was thinking of a lie.

“Mary Jennifer!”

“They took him for a walk.”

“What did I say about that?”

“Not to.”

“Why?”

“Because Jake isn’t our dog.”

“Come in the house please, Honey.”

The Bishop would be there soon to take them to church. Michael had to be cleaned up and put to bed before then. Another high-pitched scream from the back yard.

Fifteen of Lanae’s chickens surrounded the doghouse. Mary was throwing bits of wood at them.

“Honey, can you stop screaming?”

“Come get me Dad!”

“Are those hens or roosters?”

“Hens.”

“Remember Sweetheart, what have I told you?”

“I don’t like any kind of chickens!”

“Honey, are you holding a dead bird?”

“No.”

“Put it down please.”

“Come get me Dad!”

“Can you find your shirt and put it on for me?”

“Yeah.”

Deverle hoisted Michael into the tub and pulled off his jacket. He let his big feet dangle over the side of the tub. He yanked off the combat boots and stripped off the dirty socks. He undid Michael's belt and the smell of loose stool ripped through his nostrils.

Deverle went into the kitchen and reached back into the older, more mysterious parts of the pantry. Her dish gloves were probably still in there. He felt for them on the top shelf. They were out of his reach. He stretched up and finally felt the tips of the rubber gloves under a stack of magazines. Hollow rubber fingers. Empty, collapsed spaces. He backed away and leaned against the wall. He allowed himself this one, brief moment of grief. That was it. No more for the rest of the day. The moment quickly passed. He pulled the chair away from the kitchen table, stood on it and pulled the rubber gloves out from under the magazines and hurried back into the bathroom.

Michael's whole body heaved and shivered. Acrid, yellow foam spilled out of his mouth. The veins in his thick neck bulged and tears streamed from his half-opened eyes. Deverle turned his head and retched. He tore off Michael's shirt and pulled hard at the waist of Michael's jeans. His fingernails tore into Michael's skin along his legs. Michael's underwear was soaked through with dark, soupy shit. It smelled like rusted metal, dark and sulfuric. Like crude oil. Deverle pulled everything off and quickly bundled all the soiled clothes together. He popped off the screen on the bathroom window and threw the clothes out onto the ground.

Mary had slid off the doghouse and was throwing rock salt at the chickens.

“Sweetheart, did you find your shirt?”

“Yea.”

“Put it on please and come inside. You need to get dressed for church.”

Deverle turned on a cold shower and let it fall over Michael.

*Dumb son-of-a-bitch.*

“Come on son. Michael!”

Michael quickly lifted his head and gasp. His ruby red eyes popped open. He lifted his right arm, quickly twisted it and made a fist.

“Mike, look at me!”

“I am. I am....the I am.”

Michael’s arm shook violently. His fist uncoiled and dropped back into his lap. His eyes closed and his head sank. Deverle made the water warm.

He went into his garage and got a bunch of old t-shirts he used for rags in his machine shop. He soaked them all in the bathroom sink in a solution of heavy de-greaser and warm water. He lifted Michael’s big leg and caught sight of his other piercing. A thick metal hoop cut through the tip of his penis, like a ring through the nose of a bull. Deverle worked quickly and wiped up what he could. He threw every t-shirt out the window. The shower spray was weak so Deverle got a big bucket and made three or four trips to the kitchen faucet. He filled the bucket with steaming hot water, and dumped it into Michael’s lap. He turned off the shower and let the water drain. He pulled a folding chair from the hall closet and opened it and sat in front of the tub. Michael’s body fell

into a chilled, tense spasm. His big feet vibrated the metal tub. It sounded like the old outboard motor of Blackie Christensen's aluminum fishing boat.

*Warm him body to body.*

Deverle cinched up the back belt and slapped his stomach. He stepped into the tub and pushed Michael's upper body forward. He bent down and got underneath Michael's arms and lifted the big wet ox onto the lip of the tub. Deverle stepped onto the floor and steadied Michael with a hand on his back as he sat in the chair. He leaned forward and felt the muscles of his lower back catch. He fell back into the chair and pulled Michael with him and onto his lap. Deverle straightened his posture in the chair and took big, deep breaths to relax the muscles in his lower lumbar. If he didn't do this quickly that disc between the L4 and the L5 would slip and he'd be out for two weeks. He didn't dare move. Michael stopped shaking. Deverle gripped the solid dense muscles along Michael's back and pulled him close. His son's body draped across his lap. Michael's head fell into Deverle's chest. His body grew quiet. Water streamed down the length of Michael's long hair and dripped onto the worked and tired muscles of Deverle's hairy forearms. Drops of water fell from the tips of Michael's limp fingers and toes onto the cold floor. He stopped shivering. Deverle's slow and measured breaths soon matched his son's breathing. Both became calm and regular. There they were, in a clean, vestal embrace. And there they should have stayed. Forever. If only the house could have collapsed in on both of them right then.

*Take the life of this father and his first-born son. Remove a bitter cup.*

*Underground water is flooding to the surface and pooling behind dams with loose-gravel hearts. If Michael were to drop to the floor now, his head smashed against the tub. If his*

*face could be covered with wet towels. The end of terrible dreams and visitations. Then no need for floods. No washings-away.*

I cannot rearrange these events, though I may want to. I can only illuminate them for you. These are Deverle's most necessary things, these bits of hardened clay. I care deeply for this man and his children. I say nothing that would put any of them in danger. For their sake I bury unnecessary revelations. I store them in dark places where they turn cold and harmless. These are fantastic and frightening things that bore themselves into the center of the earth and never come out. The reasons Deverle Christensen and his nine children don't go spinning off into space.

As that was the only toilet in the house for ten people, Deverle couldn't sit there much longer. But he wasn't sure he could stand. He carefully rotated his spine just above his pelvis. Bones clicked back into place. Michael fell asleep.

Outside, Lanae's chickens pecked through the dirt and gobbled rock salt.

*Inside Michael's head was a scratching. A shifting of gravel. Fingernails on wood. A metal fork across concrete. Or maybe a metal rake. A branch across the clean surface of a new window.*

Mary stepped into the bathroom. She had put her new Sunday dress on backwards.

"Dad?"

"Hi, sweetheart."

"Is that Michael?"

Deverle's brain was thinking of a lie.

"Yes."

The doorbell rang.

“Honey, go let the Bishop in.”

## II REBECCA

*The Child*  
*in the historical epoch of our current epistemological regime,*  
*is the figure for this compulsory investment in the misrecognition of figure.*

*It takes its place on the social stage like every adorable Annie*  
*gathering her limitless funds of pluck to*  
*“stick out [her] chin And grin*  
*And say: ‘Tomorrow!*  
*Tomorrow!*  
*I love ya*  
*Tomorrow*  
*You’re always*  
*A day*  
*Away.’”*

*And lo and behold*  
*as viewed from the prison of tears that it always calls forth,*  
*the figure of this Child seems to shimmer*  
*with the iridescent promise of Noah’s rainbow,*  
*serving like the rainbow as the pledge of a covenant*  
*that shields us against the persistent threat*  
*of apocalypse now—or later.*

LEE EDELMAN  
*queer theorist*



Rebecca heard Deverle give Steven the instruction to drop his pajama bottoms and grab the steel pole that held up the floor joists. She looked through a small slit in the bed sheets that hung to separate boys from girls in the bare unfinished basement. Steven's head was down, his arms wrapped around the pole. He stared at a dark crack in the floor that started between his toes and led to the other wall. Rebecca closed her eyes and pulled Mary away from her nipple. Deverle was bound to part the sheet and ask if she had seen which of the boys had been up late last night.

Milk ran from Mary's mouth and wet the mattress. There had been a steady trickle for weeks after Mary began sleeping next to Rebecca. She took to wearing three t-shirts in gym class. There were days she made more milk than Mary could drink. There were dozens of visits to the dark single bathroom next to the science lab to squeeze herself into the sinks. She taped four and five Band-Aids over her nipples to hold back the flood. All of her sisters inherited large, active breasts without the instructions of how they worked and hers had suddenly come to life.

Deverle whipped his boys' bare asses with a leather belt for pissing in the basement under the stairs. There was an open drain in the floor on the bare concrete. Michael used it because he was scared of climbing the dark stairs in the middle of the night. David and Steven were just lazy. Tired, misdirected streams kept missing their mark. The basement smelled like urine and wet concrete.

None of the boys talked. So they all got the business. Deverle yanked David up off his mattress on the floor and told him to grab the pole. Alma and Paul were spared the belt, but got a gloved hand across the backside instead. As soon as Deverle left the basement, Michael tore apart David's bed sheets. A fistfight ensued. Humiliation and

anger ate up all five boys. The three older boys kicked and punched the wall. The two younger ones cried and clutched stuffed pandas and plastic barn animals. The fight engulfed everything. The clothes on their bodies. Vietnam fighter jets and World War II model airplanes hanging from the ceiling. Sports posters, porcelain horses and metal fire trucks and the stuffing from pillows and the dirty spare mattress slumped in the corner. The boys destroyed most things not borrowed from friends or new. Only two items survived.

Rebecca wrapped Mary in a blanket. She put on her sandals and quietly left out the basement door. It was early morning. She walked along the canal toward the Junction, where the twice-daily transport train brought in cattle and milk cows and took out sacks full of stock feed. The dark morning was cold. Just above the tops of the alfalfa, high in a healthy second growth, was a sweet, green mist that soaked through to Rebecca's knees. She saw her hands turn purple and numb. She made fists and lowered her head to breathe, then fainted and fell onto the softest row of a lush patch of hay. Mary fell on top of her and rolled into the dewy dirt.

There lay a dairy princess. Rebecca won an appointment to Lesley's Health Days Royalty, first attendant. Though the accident on the float during the parade knocked out two of her front teeth, the appointment increased her popularity, not just in Lesley, but in towns all over Bear River County. Deverle emptied his savings, something he did many times over, to get those two teeth replaced. A slow humid breath rose up her wet throat and over her tongue, past the fancy teeth and out her parted lips, into a morning that cared little for a young body with bruised tits and a guilty conscience.

She was the oldest and probably the prettiest. She had to be every bit as perfect as any of the women in her congregation. As of August first, exactly one year ago, she became a mother to eight siblings. Not a thing she had ever prayed for. Not a thing she or Deverle thought possible. There weren't any stone tablets around with written instructions. Just an odd and ugly panic, a kind of floating terror.

When Paul cries. When Alma cries. When Sarah cries. When blood runs from her brothers' split lips. When they fight and torture each other, the fits of a kind of lightning strike from a high overhead and fall into the pits and pores of women. It charges the mist suffocating the alfalfa. It separates the water from the minerals in the spray from Sister's Fountain. It lubricates the movement of cracks in the earth. This is Rebecca's body as it runs over with milk and tears and aching muscles. These are her children. They come from the anxious multitude, in palaces overhead, waiting. There are many. They fall like rain over water logs.

At the Junction there were five rusted boxcars. They had been there for more than a week. One had been full of prize Jersey cows. The other three came with shipments of empty feed sacks. The cars were covered with spray-paint designs. Letters and names and cartoon faces that meant something to someone from some faraway place.

Rebecca placed Mary inside one of the empty cars and pulled herself in. She took Mary into a corner and lifted up her sweatshirt. Her breasts were swollen and her nipples itched. She pulled off the Band-Aids and Mary took hold of her left tit. Rebecca leaned her head back against the rusted steel of the car. The inside smelled like a brush fire. Rebecca's chest warmed and her face flushed. She closed her eyes and faded into another half-sleep.

Her brothers wave to her from the back of Deverle's truck. They are small. No shirts. Just cut-offs and old sneakers. Rebecca runs to them through a field of dry alfalfa. It's evening. Deverle is there, threshing the hay with the Mack brothers. She opens the tailgate and lays out a blanket. She puts paper crowns on her brothers' heads and ties terry-cloth super hero caps around their shoulders. They draw beards and mustaches on each other with an eyebrow pencil they find in the seat of the old truck. They dance. They perform a play about beetles and hawks and make speeches and tell cockroach jokes. She laughs at them and claps from her worn blanket spread over the fresh chaff of the first cut.

Mary cried when Rebecca woke and moved her to the right breast. It was less irritated but more uncomfortable for Mary. At the right breast, the child couldn't hear Rebecca's heartbeat while she fed. An electric shock ran from Becca's fingers to her neck. She grabbed the muscles of her arm. Her body felt soft and strange. Would she have felt like this if she had fed her younger brothers? Mary's small lips tugged at the nipple. Her little hands held tight to Rebecca's sweatshirt. Flattened, green and yellow light flooded in between the dusty wooden slats of the boxcar. She imagined herself inside a glowing music box. Was her breast milk salty or sweet? Thick like cow's milk? Was it true mother's milk? It might be bitter or more malted — more like eggs than butter. She watched small, white drops spill from Mary's lips and run onto her bare stomach. They rolled into her navel and disappeared. Mary fussed. Rebecca moved her back to the left breast.

This was the cattle car that shipped thirty-two head of prime dairy Jerseys from the stockyards of Amarillo, Texas. Raised by a one Horton Shields, a fourth generation

rough neck who invested oil money into cattle and fed his herds the sweetest Iowa corn he could get his hands on. Shipped in from hundreds of miles away. To make the journey from Texas to Gallup, New Mexico to Durango and Casper then to the Mack Brothers at Bear River, each cow got triple doses of antibiotics and bellies full of silage and malted grain. That extra food fermented in each cow's duplicate stomachs. The rocking of the train upset many of them and they puked on each other. In such close quarters for that amount of time their steamy shit, soaked with hormones and the sugars of Iowa corn, ran from back ends onto heads and faces, into nostrils and over tongues, and dripped down on the weathered wooden planks on the floor of the cattle car.

When Kimber Mack threw open the door, the six prized Jerseys he ordered were covered with shit and piss, their eyes and ears invaded by flies. One cow continued to heave for a day and a half. The Mack boys couldn't figure out why. One had fallen down inside the car just outside Amarillo and was unable to stand for the rest of the trip. For seven hours they were unable to get her to her feet. Once they got all the cattle unloaded and onto family trucks, Kimber stayed behind to clean out the car. He flushed out the inside with the black rubber hose that still drained the old wooden water tower. Then he loaded the empty seed bags that his cousins in Elko would fill with the final yield of dry farm wheat.

The bottom and two exterior sides of the rusted boxcar were covered in paint, sprayed from cans stolen from hardware stores owned by Jews in big cities. Fat letters, cartoon cuss words, question marks, singing smokestacks. Checkered flags over a shopping-cart grand prix. One name. Over and over. In jagged, fiery green letters. *Constance*. The whole underside covered with beautiful color. Careful. Intentional.

Probably done at night, illegally. Painted by colored kids who have sex at thirteen and carry guns. Kids with black girlfriends slogging heavy sagging breasts and hips wide enough for babies to come through sideways. Because young violent city teenagers pant a wet and heavy breath for girls with big rumps. And big rumps can easily birth big babies and big babies demand big breasts full of good western cow milk that always make strong, more active offspring. Sugars, corn, careful corrals and injections produce the buttery thickness that gives dark skins their soft delicate appeal. Most of those people are gifted with smooth shiny complexions. The boys are thick and hard-bodied. Smart when they set their minds to it, but are more likely to be what the Mack brothers complain about when they go watch the Aggies play basketball. They ship those young athletes in from California, away from their women and their parents and expect them to figure out life among dairy farmers and grain fields. It's not surprising none of them ever come to work in the fields or that they do so much drinking and get so many of our young girls pregnant and never really do very well in athletics while they're out here. You can't blame them. How would a single white man get along bagging groceries and mopping high school gymnasiums to support raising nine kids by himself in the middle of Los Angeles?

The train car had been to Houston and El Paso. There was a bit of Spanish on the front side, sprayed in bright blue letters. Jagged, irregular edges surrounded by silver and white, floating see-through stars and bubbles. A big, black face with red lips and a bright smile and long fuzzy ears, one standing straight up, one flop. A pit-bull maybe. A signal to some other dark-skinned kid along the line. An invitation to a fight? No one at the Junction read it, though Kimber stood for a good twenty minutes and tried to figure it out.

This same cattle car returned to the Junction every third week in August. Things were always left behind in the slats and shelves above the door. A couple of belt buckles from a Mexican rodeo. A hubcap from a '65 Mustang. One year it was dirty children's underwear, this year — a bunch of old pornographic magazines. As soon as the inside was clean, Kimber Mack found himself alone with those magazines. He ejaculated into a corner of the boxcar and rubbed the mess into the floorboards with the soles of his work boots and piled the feed sacks on top of the stain. Kimber sat and ate orange cheddar cheese and bologna with white bread and thought things no good Christian man should ever think.

Becca stopped drinking the milk from the Mack Brother cows when she turned fifteen. It made her sick. She grew the giant chest still the same. She masturbated a Hostetler cousin when he'd come to help bale hay one summer. A lot of his semen got all over her while she was naked. She told the Bishop not a single part of that boy got inside her. The Bishop asked her to repeat the story several times, slowly, step by step. Her story stayed pretty constant each time so he deemed it credible. Still, the sexual activity, confessed with half-truths or not, kept her pregnant for seven weeks. She didn't understand why her blood went missing that month. Why she had more cramping than was usual. If she had looked at the miscarriage after it had come out she would have had a good description of her confusion that a decent doctor fielding a few well-pointed questions could have easily answered. But she covered her eyes and cried and quickly flushed the toilet. The smell gagged her. She wouldn't look at what got on the toilet tissue. She jumped into the shower and quickly cleaned herself up. What her body had done was a mystery. It was none of her business.

Rebecca heard Deverle's breakfast whistle just as the first morning light broke on the rusted roofs of the Junction's grain silos. The light was orange and oily. Smoke was everywhere belched out by the fires on the Cub River, near Jackson's pyramids and across the valley in the Wellsville Mountains. Light struggled through a hazy rusted filter high overhead and cast shadows with blurred edges. Rebecca's chest hurt. She had trouble breathing. In that atmosphere there was jaundice. There seemed to be more flies than mosquitoes. All running water looked muddy. Another whistle, drawn loud and long. Mary tightened her lips around Rebecca's nipple. Becca pulled the infant close. A comfort Rebecca's gut welled up and washed over her just under the surface of her skin. Her fingertips tingled. Her lips burned hot then went numb. Her hips, warm then cold, a cool breeze over her moist stomach and under her arms. What was she to call this? Mary's soft lips generated a mild electric buzz that shaved off the prickly anxiety that Rebecca wore most days as a flaky skin. It was certainly all right for sisters to take care of daughters.

Rebecca pulled uneaten breakfast cereal from her shirt pocket left over from last Sunday's service. This was Mary's favorite snack and it kept her quiet during the more earnest parts of sacrament meeting. This must be how the stimulation began, those many months ago, a week after Rebecca's miscarriage.

Every time Mary reached into her pocket during Sunday services, Rebecca felt her tiny hand rub against her. Mary would fall asleep with a mouth full of cereal and Rebecca would press her limp sleeping body against her breasts. Mary's open mouth leaked saliva that soaked through the white linen of Rebecca's Sunday dress.



*The Bishop's slow, deep, lumbering voice. The hard wooden benches. The chapel's bare white walls. The gentle lace cloth covering the sacrament table, blown by an early summer breeze through an open window. Rebecca's own breathing, raised and lowered her chest against her sleeping sister. The prelude of an erotic dream.*

During the first few weeks of this, Rebecca grew light-headed on several occasions and damn near fell headlong into the pew in front of her. She clenched her teeth and made fists and the spells passed.

After those first weeks, she kept Mary close, as near her chest as she could — at the dinner table with feeding bottles, while they slept. Rebecca wrapped Mary into a tight bundle and strapped her to her back as she helped the boys move sprinkler pipe. For nine months Rebecca was rapt and carnal. She would never again feel that kind of comfort. Odd rumblings forced their way into every corner of a girl barely fifteen. She never again felt that taken over. Never again, felt that elevated. Never again, did all parts of her body make sense to her.

And Mary was there, barely a year and a half. She heard Rebecca's heart flood and empty. She heard Becca's stomach compress, her lungs blow out, her muscles tense when she laughed or threw muddy work boots at her brothers. Mary clung to her and felt the rolling agony in Rebecca's bent spine as she wept over twenty-two dead bodies, Jewel Smith's prized and papered sheep, his herd of Black Corries. All of them shot and burned. Rebecca birthed every ewe in that herd. She was a young woman who had never been at a mother's breast, never lulled to sleep, never picked up, only put down.

Another whistle blew, closer and angrier. A giant crash of brush and a couple of quick snorts and Jake, the borrowed dog, jumped up into the boxcar. Deverle followed

close behind. Rebecca could take her daughter and run. She could hide under the empty feed sacks and land wherever the boxcar came to a stop. Maybe in a big city with Jewish shop owners and people who sign their names with fat letters and bright colors.

Jake sniffed each corner of the boxcar. He found a scent that pleased him and rolled in it. He licked Rebecca's toes and sniffed Mary's full diaper.

Rebecca pulled Mary away from her nipple. Mary howled. Rebecca wiped spilt milk from Mary's chin and neck and jumped down out of the car.

"It's okay baby. Let's clean you up."

Rebecca pulled off Mary's pajamas. She remembered her father telling her to never change her diaper. That was something only Dads should ever do. Deverle's whistle blew one last time. It seemed inches away. It didn't occur to her that he might come looking for her. He couldn't be mad at her. Surely he was still steamed about the boys and the drain. A new toilet was needed in the basement. He couldn't be mad at her for missing breakfast. They were all at some time or another caught doing chores or sleeping in or heading to school early. It was rare for the whole bunch to share a meal. Maybe he was mad she hadn't told him where she had gone or that she had the baby. She could explain everything and so there was nothing to worry about. Rebecca decided not to run or hide. Instead, she lifted Mary's legs out of her dirty diaper. There she saw for the first time what only Deverle and the doctor had seen.

"Rebecca!"

She turned and saw a face that didn't belong to her father. His skin was all white, no ruddy checks, no sunburn on his neck, just angry, sunken eyes beneath a furrowed brow. His lips were pressed together, tight and tucked into each other.

“Get home!”

He grabbed her elbow and yanked her away from the baby.

“Go! You’ve got breakfast to make.”

She handed him a clean diaper.

“Go on!”

Rebecca turned. Uneasy images and their explanations came to her slowly and out of order. There are places on your body you do not touch. There are ways of sitting and standing that are improper. A young person’s body is full of tricks. When you feel restless or confused, take a shower, fix yourself a snack, sing a hymn, tie your hand to the bedpost, wear your pants backwards. What you’re feeling is none of your business. Bodies are trouble — always have been, always will be. Tumors and broken bones and seizures and disfiguring disease are coming soon enough. Not a lot we can do about that. A young person who intentionally interferes with their own body complicates the ways a body falls apart.

Soon after Mary’s birth and once the funeral had past, Deverle handed Mary over to Rebecca to bathe and wash and keep from crying, like it had been with all her younger siblings. Every two years there was another wailing mouth. Every two years Rebecca redrew the colored chalk drawings on the bare concrete in the basement. Fishes and dolphins for Sarah, tigers for Paul, clouds and lightning bolts and mountains peaks for Alma, giant trees and birds for Mary. This was the last time Rebecca was allowed to hold her sister. She turned to see if Deverle had read the nature of her relationship to the baby.

She stood a ways off from the boxcar. The smoke from the fires grew thicker. Rebecca took in smaller, quicker breaths. Deep breathing caused her to cough and sneeze.

A month of hot August winds inflamed her nostrils and kept both eyes blood-shot. She could make out a new blaze burning at the foot of the Wellsvilles across the valley, far from the storage of water backed up behind Cutler Dam. She knew that morning (maybe he had already started), Jewel would burn the bodies of his prized sheep. She would not go help him bury the remains in the ground near the apple orchard. Jewel had no other work for her, so Rebecca was left without a job or things to care for.

She kneeled in the tall grass. She shook the tallest stalks and small drops of water rained down on her. She unbuttoned the top of her nightclothes and pulled out both her breasts. They were still heavy and painful. She squeezed as much milk from them as she could. Thick white drops stuck to the blades of grass and slowly dripped onto the ground. She hoped, before the late morning heat, there might come an ant or a potato bug or a grasshopper to feed on each tiny reservoir. What was she to do now, squat down, in tall grass, with a glut of mother's milk, surrounded by a summer on fire?

Take away a mother's child and she stops making milk. When she stops making milk she is ready for more children. If a man wants more children, for his land, for futures, for crowns and angry gods, he takes each infant away from its mother as soon as possible. He separates mother from daughter, one he attaches to a strange hired tit, the other he places at the end of his eager erection.

The Christensen land endowment was a thousand acres. After Deverle's marriage it more than tripled. It needed hands and feet to pay for itself and Deverle never trusted the hired help —the short, dark immigrants who came from other arid states with unknown beliefs and life histories. They came just for the harvest then disappeared. The next year none of them would return. They'd all be different. Deverle wanted every

corner of his endowment covered with his own seed. What needed to be dug up and turned over, would be done by children who loved and honored their parents. What grew and needed to be threshed and cut down would be harvested by young people with great faith and fortitude. Deverle felt the weight bearing down from the anxious multitude overhead. Day after day. Night after night. Form after form, waters upon waters. Gallons and bushels and the backs of strong sons and devoted daughters. Seeds upon seeds. As soon as the newborn could suck powdered milk from a rubber tip, every eighteen months Rebecca was handed another child — Steven, Elizabeth, Sarah, Alma, Paul, and Mary. Rebecca cradled them all while room was made ready for one more.

A mother sits in a field and clings to her only child, a girl. She refuses an increase. She resists the attempt to have the infant torn from her breast. What would it mean for that mother to refuse to give it up? If she clings to a single child her whole life through, you condemn her devotion as interference. That land begs for hands and feet in praise of the overhead. That land barter faith for water. That land trades tithes and human sacrifice for acreage. How long will you let her sit in that field and refuse?

What do you do with the un-moveable mother? You, who tears countless infants from their feedings. You, who make ribbons and strings of pearls and golden braids to hang around the pale necks of girls you keep from the sun. If this mother will not give you her child, if she will not crush her milk flow to bleed again, to offer yet another hollow opening, if she will hold her child between you and your increase, how will you procure your extra hands and feet? What does it mean to you if she refuses to leave the field with her only child? How do you remove her from your open ground?

Rebecca emptied herself until the ache in her chest went away. She sat quietly. The excess spilled down the front of her nightclothes. The sun rose above the tallest grass and struck her face. She stared into the light. The thick haze soaked up and spread apart the strongest rays of sunshine. This was a prophet's sun. A distant, fuzzy heat surrounded by blind, rusted fog. She saw tall shadows there, moving, people in crowds, some laughing, some howling, some holding fast to pieces of wrought iron, some quiet and pale and at peace.

Rebecca tucked herself in and thought weeping would make her feel better. But she had breakfast to make, brothers and sisters to get to school, and young men to talk down off bitter mounds of anger.

A hundred yards off Rebecca turned to see if the light surrounding the boxcar had changed. It hadn't. Deverle lifted Mary up by the feet to clean her legs and between her backside. Jake, the borrowed dog licked the dirty diaper that fell from the car. The morning turned hot. The day headed for a hundred degrees.

Deverle knew he couldn't wait another year to make a decision about Mary. Three different doctors each had their own ideas. None of them pleasant. He approached the Bishop about the situation. The Bishop confessed to not an inkling as to what to do.

"Brother Christensen, when you have as many kids as you've had, your bound to run into one of every kind."

The Bishop called for the Brethren.

Three of them show up in a black car. One was a surgeon. The other two were successful entrepreneurs. They gathered in Deverle's living room. Deverle sent the kids out to help Lanae move her goats up to the salt grass near the canal.

“Brethren, can I take your coats?”

“That won’t be necessary. We won’t be long.”

“Deverle, we’d like to ask first what it is you’d like from us.”

It could have been money. The Lesley congregation was poor, but because this was such an extraordinary case, the Brethren could have cut a check on the spot from the church’s main coffers. It could have been medical advice or counseling on what to tell the rest of his children. Deverle stayed quiet for a minute or two and considered all of these.

“I’d just like a blessing, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course we don’t mind.”

The Brethren smiled and each unclipped a small metal vial of consecrated oil that hung from their key chains. Deverle pulled his grandmother’s wingback chair into the middle of the living room and sat in it. The Brethren each tipped a single drop of oil from their vials onto the crown of Deverle’s head where a new bald spot was beginning to clear. The Brethren laid their hands on his head and offered a prayer. It was hard to make out what was said, with the low silky baritone in the voices. One can imagine how elaborate the invocations would need to be to solve Mary’s problem. Man or woman. Rib or one half side. What whole parts look like. What does and doesn’t belong between. How far to widen what wants to remain sealed.

“Help this elder of Israel make the right decision.”

The Brethren let off the pressure and lifted their hands. Deverle’s head lifted off his shoulders with them. Three quick full breaths filled his chest, lighter than he had ever remembered feeling. To his death he didn’t remember the Brethren’s face or its voice or

its oily hands that day. He only remembered his feet lifting off the matted carpet. The filling of his stomach. The swelling of his chest. The smooth rotations at his temples.

“Can we see Mary?” the Brethren asked.

Deverle woke Mary from a nap and brought her into the living room. He sat back down in the chair and cradled her.

“Hello Mary.”

She hid her face in Deverle’s armpit.

The surgeon knelt down and introduced himself to Mary as a doctor. He was a thoracic surgeon and rarely saw faces. He asked Mary if her dad had explained why they were there. She nodded. She wouldn’t remember him.

Deverle drew her close. She turned her head and Deverle covered her eyes with his hand.

The surgeon gently pulled off Mary’s diaper. She recoiled and brought her knees up. The Brethren took her two small legs and parted them. The surgeon leaned in for a closer look.

What the Brethren suggested was not a lot different from what other doctors had prescribed. But Deverle was sure he wanted to give his daughter a blessing. The men stood in a circle, one hand on each other’s shoulder. Other hands came together in the circle, palms up, one on top of the other, and made a platform to support Mary. They gently bounced her as Deverle uttered the prayer.

Deverle’s voice had very little baritone and he paused a lot between words like grace and beauty and patience. Words he only spoke when he prayed. Mary was quiet. No fussing at all. She fell asleep during the long prayer. Hopefully she dreamed.



III DAVID

THE JESUVE

*The earth sometimes jerks off in a frenzy,  
And everything collapses on its surface.*

GEORGE BATAILLE  
*surrealist*

The great nigger-head war of 1972 began the day Uncle Earl's oldest daughter dumped melted 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter' down the back of the khaki short pants worn by Deverle's second oldest boy, David. The Christensen family reunion had been put off for a month due to some family disturbances, so tensions ran hot between Deverle and his older brother, Earl. Their usual campsite, the high Uinta mountain meadow at the Smith and Morehouse Campground was taken by another family. The site they had to settle for was farther from the stream and over-run with hundreds of Black Angus. When Deverle arrived with all his kids, Uncle Earl's twin boys were caught in a bloody fistfight. One of them forgot to hobble the other's horse when he put it out to graze. The free horse ended up with its leg caught in the ventilation shaft of an old silver mine. Earl had to pry the boys apart. Threw one of them into a horse trough full of pond water. The other one tripped and fell into a fresh cow turd.

Earl had the rest of his boys tramp down the tall grass and clear sagebrush so the family's five trailers could park in the traditional schooner circle. His girls cut vegetables and peeled potatoes for the Dutch oven. They got into a fight over why one of them bought the fake butter. The youngest of Earl's kids set out to collect an arsenal of nigger-heads, which is a violation of the agreed-upon rules of engagement. Both teams of Christensen, The Earls and The Deverles, were to be present before harvesting could begin. The Earls had gained an unfair advantage. The kids quickly hid their cash of the dark blossoms when they saw dust kicked up down the road.

Deverle was anxious as he approached the camp. His older brother knew how sensitive he could be, so Earl made sure he and his wife were the first to run to the truck and greet him. Deverle's kids threw open the spring-loaded door on the truck's camper

and piled out the back. One of them unlocked the door on the small second-hand trailer that was being pulled behind. Deverle got the dented caravan in a trade for a month of water rights. The rest of the young Deverles poured out and ran into the arms of Aunt and Uncle Earl.

Deverle sat in the cab of the truck. David sat next to him. Quiet. Deverle expected the news about what had happened to reach over to Bear River and Earl's boys were going to give David hell for it. Deverle looked over and thought about a couple things he could to say to his son to help prepare him. He took a minute. Didn't say either one of them and slowly stepped out of the truck. David sat there and knew the longer he stayed in the cab the more likely it was that everyone could tell that something was wrong. But then, like rusty clockwork, through the cracked windshield splattered with bugs, David saw the Twins. They stalked the truck like a couple of wolves and swung a lasso. David smiled. They hadn't found out. Everything was going to be all right.

I don't know if you can sense it or not. But, I'm putting off telling you the whole story. Not because I'm uncomfortable with this kid, but because I'm a bit ignorant. This kid hadn't figured out where his body ended and other boys' bodies began. If I were to tell you how many times and where and with whom this kid got naked, there'd be a scandal. And that scandal would get pinned to the back of his head and it'd stick to him the rest of his life and I wouldn't want that. But we do have rules for nakedness and young boys with changing bodies and I don't want to undermine that either. But as much as I believe in adhering to this agreed-upon decency, I hate half-stories. So I'm going to try to explain to you what I think it meant for this kid to want to always see his twin cousins naked. I'm no expert on kids who are that way, but I'll do my best.

Deverle raised a wrestler. A damn good one. The kid was rarely pinned. He held the regional record for escapes and beat the Hostetler boy in under a minute, something nobody thought was possible. But word got around, true or not, that David was making lewd comments to his opponents during matches. And that there was inappropriate touching as well. It was half a dozen kids who came forward, even kids who had beaten him, so it wasn't just the sore losers. What settled the matter in the minds of most folks was how often David got an erection during his matches. And his was one he couldn't hide.

The championship match was bruising. But he won it. After it was over David was exhausted. He stayed on his knees, on the mat, head down. The referee held his opponent's hand. The whole gym waited. So David stood up. There it was. Not a damn thing he could do about it. And it was one of the only nights his father was able to come. Deverle ran the late shift at the dairy and it was a rare treat for him to watch his son wrestle.

His opponent called him an awful name. Mothers and cheerleaders pretended not to notice. There were a lot of whispers and giggles. David stood there and let it be. The ref raised his hand as the victor. There was scattered booing. His teammates ignored him. His coach gave him an indifferent pat on the back and David walked out to the showers.

Deverle watched the rest of the boys wrestle and sat quiet as everyone left the gym. David never came out to meet him at the door of the locker room so Deverle put on his coat and sat in his truck in the empty parking lot. A thick mat of frost covered the windshield. A cold fog herded all the light into a single triangle that hovered over the

truck. He understood what lay ahead for this kid. There wasn't much he could do. He couldn't stop February, March, and April from coming.

In May David pitched a tent up Blacksmith Fork. He took a camping stove and his rescued mustang and changed the tire on his brother's dirt bike so he could use it to get around. He left home to live in a tent because his father didn't know what to say. David lived in that tent until it was time for the family reunion.

Deverle was surprised at how happy his brother was to see him. The Twins, like every year before, set up the bucking barrel for David. Nothing seemed out of place. The news of what happened hadn't made it over the mountain yet.

This year the Twins made the bucking barrel from an old oilcan, used to collect rainwater from a busted cabin. With heavy chains they brought from Earl's machine shop, they suspended the can from four giant posts still standing from an old cattle ramp attached to the empty corral. Before the Twins could drag David out of the cab of the truck, he jumped out. This summer he didn't put up a fight.

"Oh shit," one of them said.

"Uncle Deverle this one's gonna hurt. Keep your truck running," said the other.

David's legs that year were longer and thicker. They fit around the barrel. He dug his heels into the rusted metal. He pulled on his own fitted work gloves. With his hands, opened and closed, he made two snug leather fists. The Twins strapped the rope around the barrel and over his hand as tightly as they could. David had only minutes before his fingers went numb.

"Here we go cowboy."

Deverle stood back. He was afraid. His heart broke so many times for this kid. It felt like it was meant to happen again. The Twins had hardly ever bucked David off the barrel. Michael, Deverle's oldest boy, wanted nothing to do with rodeoin'. His middle boys, Paul and Alama, were too reckless. They weren't careful enough with dangerous things, so they could never develop technique. His girls weren't meant to be up on there and his babies weren't even old enough to ride bikes yet. So he had David. They tried to work through some things before the trip. They went to the Bishop together to talk about the situation. Afterwards, the Bishop confessed to Deverle in private that he had no experience with kids that were that way. So they called the Brethren in Salt Lake and they sent a man out that David could talk to. Nobody knows what was said. David signed some papers and the man left in a black car.

Deverle shuffled the worn baseball cap to the back of his head and looked down at his feet. He kicked the dirt. A small shadow moved over his work boots. Swallows were out. There weren't many that year. It had been real dry. But at least the aspen had bounced back from the bark cankers. The sky was clear after a night of rain. The sage was wet. Deverle could smell the horses.

David stayed on the barrel. That frustrated Earl's older boys so they dumped a bucket of muddy water on him as he jumped off. He couldn't free his hand and they left him tied to the barrel. Deverle's girls loaded up on nigger-heads and shot them from the wrist rockets Deverle gave them for Christmas. The Earls took cover. Uncle Earl laughed and ducked the barrage to get to the barrel. He helped David loosen the rope.

"That's a good ride son."

"Thank you, sir."

Earl extended his giant hand. David smiled big and took in heavy breaths of air. His hand felt broken, but he quickly grabbed his uncle's and gave it a hearty shake.

We'll stop here. I realize I've started telling you a story you've already heard before. It feels to me like you think you know what's coming. Like you've got things figured out. This must be David's true story. This is David writing about himself. You've figured this is his confession.

Some of these characters are him. Some of them aren't. Some of them are relatives or friends or people he's heard of. The summer described is real. The tamped grass and diverted streams. The old corrals and knotted fence posts. Some of these are people David wished he could have been. People he wished he could have been closer to. You've heard this kind of beginning to a thousand different stories. It's happening right now. In high mountain meadows, groups of the gathered generations of families collate and rearrange their western legacies. But how prepared are you for a story like this to proceed? A kid who is that way, on a landscape made for other men. If finishing this story makes you uneasy do it the simple, old-fashioned way.

First, pick a clown. Any clown. The man in a dress. The tortured father. The muscled-bound hustler addicted to methamphetamine. The better-dressed half of a newly-wed couple throwing a hundred grand at a female surrogate to take up their mixed semen and make them a legacy.

Now pick the tragedy. A man raises six kids with a depressed wife for the appetite of a voracious religion. A young wrestler hangs himself in a barn, over cow shit and rusting metal. A ranch hand is dragged behind a horse by his testicles through an open field of prickly pear. Pick any one of the myriad ways you know how people at your



margins are harangued and killed. Any one will do. You'll read that novel, won't you? Give that film an award? Name a plant after David?

Now think of his final tableau. Where do you put him? Up there, on that highest peak with grizzlies and bighorn sheep? Do you imagine him herding cattle with dogs and spindly grandfathers? Do you see him in coal mines, driving railroad spikes, or splitting rails? Can you see him on the backs of bison? Tell him what to do to stake his claim on this same piece of mighty ground. And what of his family? How do you imagine them, having bred the likes of him?

Up from underground came his father and grandfather. Up from underground, a crack opened, filled with copper, then scoured into an open wound. Up from underground came the violent cost of electricity, an illuminated world's fair, street lamps, and hotel chandeliers. Miles of coiled copper scratched out of the earth inch by inch in lengths that drove men mad. Men who bought and beat women. Unconscious women who abandoned their sons. The picture of such a man, David's grandfather, a man who did violent, awful things hangs above his window, framed, next to a picture drawn by Dr. Suess. Is that tough enough? That he honors a publicity photo from 1933 of Blackie Christensen, a prize fighter, a romantic mongrel of the violent American West. A part of the world that chews on these leathery, worn-out notions of manhood like dogs at a rawhide. If David stakes that claim on a character who drank more than he ate, who knew only vulgarity and wore it as a hardened necessity, if he stakes that claim, frames it and squares it off, then will you let him give names to things, to colorful plants and birds, to rock formations and cliff art? If he says he is like the men that have come before him can

he name a river or a waterfall or an Indian tribe? Can David then help contribute to the mythos of an American West? Or would you still have him dead in the attempt?

Think of a different story for David. A mind that has no concern for offspring. What does such a primitive brain think? When he stands in a field without the infinitude of generation, without that sprawling family tree rooted in his groin where do his thoughts go? What does he see?

He sees the beauty of his own body as it lives in a present tense. His sex explodes without concern for generation or increase. Without increase there are no storehouses. Without increase there are no fences. Without increase there are no creeks diverted, pooled and hemorrhaging in clay ditches or leaking through metal troughs. David's possessions perish every evening, used up with the setting sun. Without increase, for him, there is only wet sage and horse shit.

He stands in a field, eyes on his feet, barefoot, craggy toenails and cracked skin. He will never pray. He is now his own center. His skin, his only boundary. Without David to define you, your center is broken open. Like a cracked egg on hot, pitted, cast iron, your center bleeds and spreads. Your borders are coming apart. Your margins are abandoning you.

Once you stood in your straight-edged fields, eyes cast to a vacant sky. At your margins you dug holes, strung jagged wire between poles of pine and poplar. You married after the first bleed. You mapped and drew lines that cleaved mountain peaks in half, parted wetlands, and furrowed the bloody backs of Africans and the soft spaces between women's legs. At the margins you sliced through the faces and chests of boys strapped to split rail fences when you found out they were that way. You stood there, in

your field, surrounded by degrees and latitudes. Lined the perimeters with your favorite plants, carelessly named them for the colors of sunshine, the skirts of beautiful women, and African slaves. This is how you've fenced yourself in.

David has no land to protect, for children, for paternity, for posterity. In his field he is but a present passing moment. A brief spark. Not given to definition or category or ill-fitting names. He does not reckon with square and compass. David's earth is pocked and irregular. He leaves nothing behind, because before him there was nothing. In a field with no margins he stares into a pond at his feet. He sees the refracted image of increase. The beauty of one eye for one eye. One birth for one passing away. He sees the beauty of sex, of liquid light, of indulgence. He sees expenditure without return. He sees his own miraculous brevity. He sees the beautiful dead.

Deverle's that-way son, never got beaten up or down. He helped his fellow Deverles win the nigger-head war. On his second attempt he got bucked off the barrel on purpose which endeared him to the Twins for his toughness. That act of bravery helped him convince the Twins to swim naked in the hidden pools on Beaver Creek.

He never did assault young athletes in football locker rooms. Didn't marry other men in conciliatory, watered-down churches or make his increase from the rented wombs of desperate women.

David lives in fields under borrowed tents. He counts winter eagles in salt marshes. He markets backyard produce. He is naked often, early, and unexpectedly. And he has learned the proper name for the nigger-head. *Rudbeckia occidentalis*. Western coneflower.

#### IV ATTRITION

## DOMPAMINERGIA

*two millions years ago*  
*Homo habilis*  
*increased his meat-eating*

*enhanced 80,000 years ago*  
*from fire and cooking*

*came the high dopamine personality*  
*with high intelligence*  
*a sense of personal destiny*  
*a religious and cosmic preoccupation*  
*an obsession with*  
*goals*  
*conquests*  
*an emotional detachment*  
*a risk-taking mentality*  
*ruthlessness*

*hunting to show off*  
*procure male coalitions*  
*struggle for status*

*increase psychological disorders in industrial societies*

*dopamine*  
*speeds up internal clocks*  
*creates preferences for*  
*novelty*  
*competition*  
*aggression over*  
*nurturance and community*

JOHN D. CURRENT  
 RICHARD WRANGHAM  
 KRISTEN HAWKES  
*behavioral ecologists*

Michael pissed his bed the day his sheep were due for auction. He fell into a deep sleep early that morning, rare for this kid who got no more than a couple hours rest every night. He dreamed of clouds made from fine wool, tartan plaid fabric, and hooded jackets on beautiful women. Juicy racks of lamb put on expensive plates of food and placed in front of important people. Deverle loaned him money to buy thirty-two black-faced Suffolk ewes and a single ram. Then at Christmas, he bought Michael a papered Australian Sheepdog to help herd. Michael hated the dog and hadn't the patience to train it. The dog had nothing to do so it chewed off the tails of two of Lanae's tomcats, killed two roosters and got into the corrals next door where the Mack Brothers kept their Angus. Michael traded the Sheepdog for an aggressive Blue Healer. He wanted to husband the male and sell the pups. But that breed was meant for herding cattle over long dry distances, so when the dog got around sheep it bit at their heels and scattered the flock. Michael was due to make a good profit on these sheep and he didn't need a dog damaging the merchandise. So he gave the dog's owner a hundred bucks and a couple of barn cats he stole from Lanae, two real good mousers, to get him to take the dog back. The dog ran away two weeks later and one of the Mack Brothers shot it thinking it was the coyote.

The profit on these sheep was due to be huge. The meat on twelve of them was rich and perfectly fatty. Michael fed them fresh alfalfa and clover, then in the winter, a mix of Jewel Smith's sweetest dried corn, rolled oats and mineral salts taken from the clays licks along the upper Cub River. It never occurred to Michael that David would target the sheep.

David dumped a wheelbarrow full of cat feces he gathered from the pile Lanae made at her back fence, into the feed of Michael's sheep because Michael filled David's diesel tractor full of regular gasoline in retaliation after David threw an empty pop bottle at Michael's head in the basement after Michael tore off a piece of wood paneling to reveal David's cache of male pornography. Michael was caught in a fit of rage because David threw Michael and his mattress off the top bunk onto the floor because Michael wouldn't wake up as he pissed his bedding. Urine soaked through the mattress and dripped down on David asleep on the bottom bunk.

There were a hundred other things said during the early hours of this battle. Glass, clay and plastic objects got broken, some tied to stones and sunk in the canal, some smashed against concrete. There were fuming accusations of sodomy and bestiality, laziness and ungodliness, of being a faggot, a hunchback, a rosy-ass ape, an outcast, a failure, a retard, a woman, a mongoloid, a pig, a pedophile, unwanted, an accident, a faceless turd, and ugly. David told all of Michael's friends that he still wet his bed at seventeen. In return, Michael beat and bruised David and left scars on only the most visible parts of David's body. He put a hot iron from the fireplace to the back of David's neck. He gave David a cut above his left eye by chucking a rusted can at him. Michael was compelled to leave as many permanent marks as he could, to bring into balance the brothers inequitable conceptions. David thought better thoughts. His ideas were quicker, clearer, and more useful. David's smile lit up a more handsome face, with whiter teeth and smooth olive skin free from any blemish. When Michael found David's cache of magazines hidden in the wall, he had exposed the only thing that mattered to anyone in Lesley. How are you having kids? Who you giving the land to? David's body wasn't

interested in wives or extra mouths to feed. Once Michael told the world what David was, David knew he would be denied the promise given those who put their bodies to proper use. David was excluded from the future.

In acres and volume, Deverle gave David the biggest share of the farm's square footage. Micheal didn't want the barely or the tractor or the endless rows of muddy earth. He wanted his father to want to give it all to him, however. He wanted to be admired and lauded, to be worthy of the surplus. But Michael was too much like his grandfather, Blackie Christensen, a man who lived through the driest years on record in Lesley. Blackie was there, August 1928, the month Sisters Fountain dried up, went alkaline, and turned into barely a drizzle of salty yellow water. In 1926, when Blackie's father, Janus Christensen, bought the spring and the 500 acres of dry dirt that surrounded it, he was convinced the spring was preparing to come to life and make him a rich man. Michael heard his grandfather tell the same story a million different ways.

"God come up from underground, Michael. He pushed that water up for my father and made that empty hole in the ground sing, like the sisters on Easter Sunday."

Janus Christensen swore he could smell the water. There was a vast ocean that lay a thousand feet underground. He leaned into the hole every morning, dropped in dirt and heavy stones and screamed old Scandinavian phrases, mostly cuss words and vulgar limericks, down into the dark opening. He lowered himself and hung from an old rope. Bursts of cool, moist air at different times of day and night blew him against the side of the cavern as he watched his dowsing rods spin and cross, pulled on from some dark magnetic center. The entire farm, every dry bit floated above an aquifer unlike anything anywhere in the world. When the fountain came to life the next year, Janus leveraged all



he had to secure bids for the water rights. He was to be a rich man. Six months later Sisters Fountain was dry. Six months after that Janus hung himself in the Bear River County Jail after knifing to death a young Mexican who laughed at his misfortune at the bar in McCracken's Inn. Six months after that Blackie hopped the rails and may have been shot to death on a merchant marine ship headed for Java. Deverle, the only child of Patricia Mack Christensen was left to dry farm a slope and rocky bit of earth barely suited for sage and rabbit brush. All that ugly misfortune found its home in Michael, where it didn't belong but where genetic accident offered a blind invitation.

Michael, the ugly bastard, didn't look like any kind of man who could make children majestic enough to command these richly seeded rows of earth. To beauty goes the surplus. This is the grand secret that has out-lasting all other truths. Feed the fattest. Feed the most adorable mouth, the one with the loudest and longest nighttime outrages. Feed what does not relent.

Where did the first full belly come from? Who was the first young man to hold in his hand something left over, this new measure of time, when suddenly there were things left to count and divide? The beginning of spare time. How did he save that first extra bit? All his siblings, especially those with offspring were still compelled to finish everything in front of them. The mothers with children needed every bit of bark or berry or charred meat to make each ounce of milk needed by each infant. Mothers became meat and man-dependent. And because this young man had no milk to make, no infant to raise, his belly filled first. He was the first of his kind to consider excess. He was the first to discover the left-over moment. He was the first to discover the future.

*I will be hungry tomorrow, as will my father and my brothers and other men related to these women and their children. My extra handful will be there and, as if from empty space, when I present this food I will offer an explanation. I will describe the world's first miracle. I will feed myself from my past.*

Then with every kin-gathering, with every animal killed, with every raid and attack, this young man will forever take more than he can eat. In excess he creates the future. A distant nowhere where brothers will ask for help, where children will cry out and mothers will beg and fathers will learn to speak and write and tell stories and count and record all that their sons collect.

In surplus the young man is compelled to build giant structures to store and protect. In surplus he builds towers and high buildings from which to make speeches and explain protocols for futures when others will ask for help, futures that become more distant and tangled.

What a strange in-between is this. There is danger in that piece of extra meat. You feel it. The electricity there, just behind your eyes. It runs the lengths of your arms and legs. What fire set to animal flesh will now do to your brain. The absent is coming. The knowledge of not-yet moments. The promise of lightning, of a constant fire in gut and gonad.

So you sit and watch your family feed themselves, your father and mother, your young sisters and their small infants. None yet know what you know. With your new spare thoughts, you barely understand what they are to you. Your brother, there, feeding, then sleeping. How do you explain surplus to him? What you collect in excess, you must

keep from him. Give him nothing. If you do, he too will discover the future. In excess, you must never be your brother's keeper.

That young man kept his excess hidden under fallen trees, in caves and holes in the ground. His brain gave way to a mind that could not live without a future. He began to dream. He made maps and spoke in riddles. He made metaphor from memory. And at some foggy moment, at a time designated by some disturbance somewhere far away, a presence appeared before him. A presence he had felt before and feared might exist there in his piles of rotting gristle and bone. He felt fear for the first time. Not fight or flight but a cowering incapacity. He began to fear the future. And he would never treat his brother the same way again.

David didn't really want the barley either. He hated being on a tractor with the repeating right-angle turns, row after row, endlessly powering planters and combines and bailers. But Deverle insisted, the eldest is given the stock and the range, the second son gets the seed and the dirt. When Sisters Fountain came back to life after the earthquake the week Mary was born and the water ran clear and continuous for that first year, Deverle's worthless chunk of a weathered thousand acres of grass and thistle, suddenly turned Deverle from a subsistence dry-farmer into an anxious rancher. And all nine of his kids each received a father's uneasy endowment.

Michael refused to ride on horseback to move the sheep to the mountain pastures up Franklin Basin. Instead, he bought a motorized mule to run them along the dusty road up Dry Canyon. He made a deal with Kimber Mack to graze his sheep with Kimber's Corienne cattle. It involved money and some other hidden arrangement that kept Michael away from the farm. He was gone days at a time. He came and went as he pleased.

Kimber kept a tight lip when Deverle asked about any new pregnant ewes. After the first year, Michael had cash for Deverle from the profits of his sales at the Benson auctions. Then when Deverle wanted to do a quick inspection Michael rounded up a few sheep, Deverle asked a couple of questions, looked at leg or a tongue or a testicle, spit out a chunk of spent sunflower seeds, asked a third question, usually about vaccinations or the feed budget, and that was that.

Michael was caught in all the shady shit people talk about in whispers, then read about in Sunday papers. He lived in shadows, full of present moments linked together in easy chains.

David borrowed 500 bucks against the price of the brand new John Deere tractor Deverle gave him for his sixteenth birthday to adopt a two-year old mustang that the BLM ranger from the wild horse round-up was sure nobody could break. By the time Deverle got around to asking about the animal, David had the horse broke and outfitted with such a slick tack and saddle, Deverle was unable to overthrow his own sickening romance for the American West to demand that David give the horse back and retrieve the money. Seeing his boy on this beautiful and lively animal drove off the stagnant waters and reanimated the patriarchy to which he had tied himself for twenty years. This is what the blessed covenant was supposed to feel like and he wasn't about to throw it off.

Toward the end of the day, a bare-knuckle fistfight ensued. It swung in David's favor. The phrases "chicks hate chigger dicks," "honey moon with a gear shift," and "ass full of heart worms," were parts of the vulgarity the boys hurled at each other. Michael was well hung over and dehydrated. He was not the athlete David was. David bloodied

Michael's nose and scratched his face and neck so bad, he sheered off Michael's acne scabs and undisturbed pimples. Michael bled from the dirty pores.

A wrestling match marked the beginning of the end of this struggle. It started when Michael would not back down after the fistfight. David pinned Michael up against the giant exposed roots of the old cottonwood in the back yard. Michael freed himself by punching David in the testicles. Then he raced to the tool shed and ripped Deverle's tools off the wall, stepped out and threw hammers and screwdrivers at David. One stuck into the trunk of the Chinese elm. One hit Jake, the borrowed dog, across the back legs as he cowered behind his doghouse. Michael rushed David with a crow bar. A half-assed display that made David laugh. He reached to disarm Michael, but he swung the iron and hit the back of his David's hand and broke it. David fell to the ground in horrible pain. Michael was weak and out of breath and drunk and humiliated. He hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. His red lips and mouth and teeth and gums were dry and cracked. His jaw clenched and muscles in his neck felt like they had come undone. He spent the profits from the deal with Kimber Mack in ways that were killing him.

Michael stood over his fair, younger brother, the one with smooth olive skin, stretched tight over hard compact muscles and stiff bones, with blue eyes and deep golden hair. Michael was pale-skinned and freckled, mats of thick, coarse orange fur on his head and arms, chest and back and above his eyebrows, face loaded with scars and open wounds. Michael raised the tire iron up over his head.

*This moment is new born. I won't remember it happening like this. I won't see the land or these animals or this dry rotten valley. I won't remember it like this at all.*

Michael was to swing that piece of iron and split open his brother's skull to save David from the madness of birthright. Michael wanted none of it. And he wanted David to want none of it. But he knew he'd always be the ugly lumber. When the earth calls on its loans, it always comes for the dead weight of the first born.

Take your brother's life. It will be of little consequence. What spirit watches your father cannot see you. His land is not your land. His land has memory. It claims to know itself. It claims to know you and your father and your grandfather and all those men who came before you. The men who believed in that great chain of being. You are set apart. Michael, if you don't take your brother's life, you will wander the rest of your days gathering from roadsides and empty parking lots. You will eat your food from plastic containers and drink from metal cans and rusted pipes. What you do to your younger brother is of little consequence. The swindle was arranged long before your were born. There isn't a thing you can do about it. Four walls for four walls. One container for another. One death sentence for another.

Michael lowered the tire iron. David's arm was numb and he was barely conscious. Michael knelt down next to him and fingered a crusted clod of dirt.

"Look. Listen to me."

David looked at his ugly brother and spit in his face. Michael stayed still. David stumbled to the back porch. Michael stood and threw the iron through the windshield of the John Deere.

"Like I give a fuck about that machine, Mickey."

Michael climbed into the cab of the tractor and retrieved the iron. David's vision blurred. He watched Michael run to the mustang's corral. David slid down the railing and slowly

fainted. Michael tore open the lock on the corral with the claw of the iron and threw open the gate. He chased David's mustang out and it ran down the dirt road toward town.

Michael knelt down on the hard scorched clay that in an earlier wetter world was underwater, near horn and feather corals, surrounded by lungfish and ancient mollusks. Just below him, down thirty-five feet where thousands of fossils embedded in pure white dolomite sandstone, trilobites, spiny bone fish, eocrinoids, things that lived their lives anchored in underwater sand but reached with long, wide-sweeping arms up toward sunlight and the debris falling from things swimming near the surface.

*The flood from the breach will scour the spot under Michael down to within a foot of this formation. Michael's body will be washed a mile away and pinned under boulders of granite and birds-eye marble.*

Just one more doomed water creature, Michael knew he had done all he was meant to do. He was beat by the swindle negotiated in a time when women lied and cheated their religions to find favor with husbands who controlled the soils outside the tents that confined them. The future never looked good on Michael. It stopped visiting his dreams. He conceded. To the fair son go the spoils. In Michael's hand, just a tire iron.

Becca stepped on to the back porch and helped David into the house. She saw Michael in the corral on his knees. *Throw down the iron, Mike.* Instead, Michael tossed the iron up into the air over his head. He sat still in the dust and dry horse shit.

Four miles away, in the district chapel, the Brethren prayed for guidance and a successful harvest. The iron over Michael's head flashed at the back of Deverle's mind. Or was it some other object from his childhood, an aluminum baseball bat, a rusted mink trap, an old horseshoe. The image was abrupt and unfamiliar. The jolt interrupted a mid-

sentence calculation. Deverle paused the vote of the High Council on whether or not to collectively grow and sell barley to a big company with a German name. The magnetic charge of some ancient mind, infinite, strong enough to conduct wood, cast strange, aboriginal images in high relief across Deverle's field of vision.

The American buffalo is gone. No elk or deer close at hand. No chieftains with whom to collaborate, to trade women for meat, to build gates and harems. There is no more polygamy. There is just an ugly eighteen-year-old, alone, dangled from a single branch of his invisible ancestry. He is deaf to the echoes of the agitated hunters, the fire-keepers, the grunts from fat throats not yet long enough to make speeches. The hoarders of hides and flint tips, the spear-makers. Meat-eaters with brains bathed in luxuriant chemicals, passionate, curious wanderers who swam and built boats and mixed red ochre paint and saw ghosts and melted precious metals and danced and got drunk night after night. Who hallucinated after orgies and banquets and red wine. Who left continents full of poverty and disease to venture farther afield for fertile un-fucked lands bringing with them their bloody futures.

*Michael is no steward. He is a condensation and he buckles under the weight of hundreds of ransacked generations. These unbalanced loads of millennia crush him.*

The vote of the High Council was unanimously in favor of forming a twelve-farm collective to grow Deverle's engineered six-row barley and sell it at a set, maximum price. What vision he thought he may have had was of a timid disposition. It quickly evaporated. A wasted bit of electricity.

The barley was near ready to harvest. Deverle had the largest track of watered land, the largest net worth now that the water from Sisters Fountain had flowed



consistently for a year. The harvest price was locked into a ten-year plan and the Brethren voiced little concern that all the barley was going to make beer.

Michael got drunk at age twelve. Every year after that came something new. One new combination of molecules piled on top of what fermented barley produces. One substance on top of so many others, a great chemical chain of being for kids with brains incapable of organizing excess. That great brain with a troubled, future-thinking consciousness, that in young ugly boys compels thoughts to become uncoiled and slack. Firings are unable to make sense of the crowded information, the history, the motivations, the violent spinning pantheons of gods and magicians, pre-existences and parallel universes. Michael knew intoxication only as organization. It surrounded him as he walked his father's fields growing this single golden crop. A forever crop, sucking life from topsoil, surviving on nothing but science and petroleum. Weird and wild strings of carbon. What keeps monsters alive.

At the final vote, a yes from Brother Roskelly, the tire iron hanging above Michael's head fell back to earth. It landed in the dirt and stuck into the hard clay just to the left of Michael's opened hand.

*You'll have to find another way.*

We would normally send you into war, on foot, at the front of the line, with a single buckshot and an ounce of gun powder. We would normally kill young men like you tens of thousands at a time, hand to hand, in muddy ditches and dark jungles, across deserts and oil fields. Young men who have no other way to manage the excess chemistry inside their skulls. Without the meditations, the hermitages or the cloistered devotions to off-world paternities, most young men are incapable, without the mammoth or the saber-

toothed cat, of directing the force of their life histories without the violent instincts formed when men hunted large animals and hid from hungry predators. Instead they stalk mountain peaks and raging seas, the empty spaces above the earth, quickly-traded money and war and empty land and drug addiction. Michael's mind fights against a body made thousands of years ago. The millennial confusion of instinct without intent, desire without reward, *dopaminergia*, the chemical stupor of desire and seeking, the hunter's essential aphrodisiac, forever diverted away from pleasure. In the pursuit of big game—the giraffe, the ibex, the elephant, the mammoth—croons a man's chemical god. The thrill at the tip of a fierce tusk, at cliff's edge, in religious ecstasies and heroin needles, in the silky sweet smoke of methamphetamine, and in explosive jets of male ejaculate, all such furies bed down in the softest spots of a man's meaty brain.

Michael stood up from the cracked earth. He tore off his shirt and spit blood and thick saliva into the dirt. He dug out the wet tobacco from his bottom lip and flicked it against the side of the mustang's watering trough. His feet were swollen and it'd be several hours before he could get his dirty work boots off. He walked to the back porch and yelled through the dirty screen door.

“Becca! Hand me the phone and dial Preston's Auto-body.”

Michael sat on the porch. Rebecca handed him the pink receiver through the tear at the bottom of the dark mesh and Michael began the negotiation on the cost of a new windshield. He'd get the family a good deal.

## V DECOMPOSITION

## THIS COMPOST

*O how can it be that the ground does not sicken?  
 How can you be alive you growths of spring?  
 How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards,  
     grain?  
 Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you?  
 Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?*

*Where have you disposed of their carcasses?  
 Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations?  
 Where have you drawn off of the foul liquid and meat?  
 I do not see any of it upon you to-day, or perhaps I am deceiv'd,  
 I will run a furrow with my plough, I will press my spade through  
     the sod and turn it up underneath,  
 I am sure I shall expose some of the foul meat.*

WALT WHITMAN

*poet*

Mary had been alive only 72 hours the day a christ visited Deverle. The first hot winds of August flattened the winter wheat and broke branches off the Chinese elm in the backyard. It blew the plastic lawn furniture up against the chain-link fence and hurled the kids' blow-up swimming pool and a week's worth of laundry into the canal. It took Rebecca three hours to fish everyone's t-shirts and underwear out of the murky water.

Barely dressed, with an empty stomach and a broken heart, Deverle climbed to the top of Plymouth Peak. He saw a thin column of smoke rise in the south. Another fire had started just south of Hardware Ranch.

During the winter, Fish and Game fed an elk herd there of almost a thousand head. It was Deverle's favorite family field trip, the day before Christmas. The giant wooden sleds pulled by Clydesdale and Percheron geldings. All the kids on hay bales drinking chocolate from the plastic cups poured from warm thermoses. Thick breath from the bugling elk bulls. That far-off, leftover noise of males still contending. Hot jets of steam turned crystalline as they rose into the tall, spread racks of antlers. Farmers brought their loads of extra alfalfa every year to keep the herd fed through the winter. The holiday families in layers of red and white wool, mittens and scarfs and tasseled hats. Mothers wiping snot and spilt chocolate off their chins. Odd out-of-town relatives with out of tune guitars singing carols and sneaking whiskey. The fancy cowboy driving the team, reciting a script about the feeding program, where the elk used to roam during winters before settlements. Nobody listened. Everyone grinned in the frigid air, as custom would have them. *Her gorgeous smile under a small wet nose between rose-colored cheeks. She kissed Alma's cold forehead as he sat on her lap.* A quick jerk of the sled and they fell over backward. Then laughter and helpful hands from strangers who introduced

themselves and later became family friends. Alma insisting, the whole car ride home, that they re-enact the same accident next year.

Every year they crammed more and more people onto each giant sled. They soon charged fees for parking and extra seat cushions. The sleds wore deeper grooves into the dirt as less snow fell. The elk were muddier. During the milder winters most could still find food in the higher elevations. Each year fewer elk came to the ranch.

The fire at Hardware Ranch could burn. The elk and the snowy sleigh rides were part of a terrible suffering. Deverle welcomed the fire.

*Burn over every managed acre. Split apart that artificial herd. Move them back into the isolated high mountains meadows. Get them off the ranchers' fields of wind-blown strafe. Save the feed for the hungry cattle. Burn the wood sleds and let the draft horses free.*

He circled the summit around to the west side, facing Malad. Away from Lesley and the Bear River Valley. He entered a small overhang of rock. He took off all his clothes and wept.

The figure stood at the back wall inside the small cavity. He wore a thin covering, a white opaque poncho, open along the sides, reaching his shins. Naked underneath.

He appeared to be mostly what Deverle imagined he'd be. He bore a tall, slender, muscular body of flesh and bone. Without blood. Countenance of the noonday sun. Not real talkative. This is the man he loved above all others. Deverle did what he was taught to do should something like this happen. He fell to his knees and lowered his head. Between his legs blew bits of grass and dried lichen in tiny, swirling fits. The figure stayed at the back of the cave. Couldn't say if he floated above the ground at all, but his

feet were cracked and dirty. No way of knowing how long he'd been there waiting. Nothing in the cave caught fire or froze. No holes in the earth opened up. Deverle hadn't prayed for three days. He wondered if that mattered. He hadn't slept much or eaten much or been about the business of the farm. He spent hours running the ridgeline between Flat Top Mountain and Plymouth Peak. He did keep all his church appointments and attended all the meetings with the Bishop and the High Council. He kept his mind busy with the affairs of others. Those who had no money or children or ways of keeping their own lives from unraveling.

It's impossible to talk about Deverle's loss. Suddenly there was no use for his children. He no longer cared to rise before the morning sun. To walk through his fields and measure the dew point, whether it was high enough to bring the minimum amount of moisture to his stricken wheat. He no longer cared to kneel among his crop and offer his daily prayer. He lost the memory of his childhood daydreams. What had he hoped would happen? A man without a spouse is no man at all. He's the fool high-steppin' at the side of gilded thrones. The failed suitor to a third daughter, always afraid of strange shadows and awkward glances. A single man raising nine children is not a patriarch. He's a prospector, rootless and wandering, probing for water with a crooked stick. A single man has no claim to green fields or proud children. All a single father owns is madness and a rotting body.

In the calm of this initial moment Deverle thought of a joke. He imagined the figure there raising his arms and looking up at the ceiling of the cave and saying, "Take this, my buddy." The figure smiled, "Sorry, let me try that again. Take this, my *body*."

Deverle couldn't see the christ through his own clouded and swollen eyes. Silly things like this have happened to so many sad people. He doubted so many of their absurd stories. He would never tell anyone about this christ. Deverle thought of another inappropriate joke, but realized the guy could read his thoughts. He felt the urge to drag the man into the light and ask him a single question and make the christ look him deep in the eye as he gave his answer. But the same source that prompted the urge quickly withdrew it and Deverle stayed still. From the back pocket of his blue jeans resting on a ledge in front of him, Deverle saw the edge of an old crumpled photograph sticking out of the money pocket in his bison leather wallet. The photo so many store clerks and ranchers and cattlemen had asked about during transactions. Deverle had the photo there on purpose. Deverle told all who asked that it was a picture of him as a little boy. A bright and happy seven-year-old in a pressed, white, short-sleeved shirt. Honey golden hair, round nose and cheeks plumped by a giant, white-toothed grin. It wasn't a picture of a young Deverle. It was a picture of his father as a little boy.

Here's where the stories of the Christensen men should be told. But by whom? Janus thought little of his son. Blackie cared even less for Deverle. Deverle's older brother Earl was the boxer and the baseball star. Earl knew more what words to say to a drunken father sitting on worthless land. Truth is, there is no story. Deverle's father is nothing but the black and white outline of a prizefighter on an old poster. Might as well be an advertisement for dish soap. The image held as little weight.

Can't say whether Deverle knew the truth of the photo. Don't know if he convinced himself it really was him or he knew it wasn't and just felt comfortable in the lie. He took the picture from the wallet and held it out in front of him and into a small



patch of sunlight. Big creases cut across the child's forehead and through the rusted and broken-down farm equipment in the background. Don't know where it was taken or why the little boy smiled. It may not have even been Deverle's father. Blackie Christensen may have only ever existed on promotion posters and on the payout tallies in the ragged notebooks of bookies and loan sharks.

The christ had nothing to say. But he did step out of the shadow and held out his arms. The standard gesture. Deverle had nothing to be ashamed of. That moment didn't feel like a confession. He smoothed the photograph across his bare thigh, refolded it and stuck it back in his wallet and tossed the wallet back onto the pile of his work clothes. Deverle heard weeping inside the cave. He wasn't making the sound and it didn't come from the christ. It came from the rocks or the lichen, maybe, or the wind, pushing its way in over the ceiling and along the walls. Deverle stood and the guy stepped toward him and embraced him. Deverle felt the christ's warm breath on the back of his neck. He put his arm around Deverle's waist. The man's skin was cool and smooth like polished stone. The weeping brimmed up gently from somewhere deep underground. The sound quietly and politely covered the floor of the cave up to the men's ankles. Deverle lifted his own arm and embraced the christ high across the back. His other hand around the man's narrow waist. Deverle felt for the tear of flesh near the ribs. As they embraced, their chests opened and pressed together. The cave cooled.

To tell a guy like Deverle that one day he'd have this kind of a visitor always felt foolish. Even for the Bishop or any of the fellas on the High Council or any one of the Brethren—whenever they spoke of a savior's loving embrace or an out-pouring of tears,

the Brethren were usually speaking of stories told by women, stories about one of the New Testament Marys, or the old woman who never got mail from her kids.

The Brethren didn't tell the stories about men who took up the bare feet of other men. How the rough hands of working men carefully handled a dusty heel, poured water down the length of a muscular ankle, smoothed it across the top of a thick foot rubbing the moisture into a wide spread of tired toes.

Deverle suddenly worried about what was happening. What if this wasn't part of what he had been told? What if something more than his wife had been taken from him? What if all his most sensible wits had been buried with her? What if this was madness? As he laid his head on the christ's shoulder, Deverle saw all his sons without wives, without marriages or children. All of them speeding past playgrounds and public parks in refigured Pontiacs and Camaros. He saw knife fights and gambling and fancy dinners, all of them idol worshippers and masturbators.

Blood rushed back into Deverle's face and fingertips. His skin heated up and he began to sweat. He dove back into his clothes, ran the ridgeline around Plymouth Peak and slid down the shale scree above Sisters Fountain. He fell and the shale's thin sharp edges sliced through a vein on his left arm. He raced back to the farm, begging his body not to bleed to death.

Deverle's Second Vision lasted four days.

*Pallor mortis*, or the first day.

From Sisters Fountain it looked like someone driving a Miller's Meat truck dumped a body into a dry ditch that ran along Jan Mack's grass-fed Angus pasture. The Fountain made deep booming sounds that Deverle felt through the soles of his rubber

boots. A faint cool air rose up and Deverle heard water dropping off ledges or being pulled up through cracks in the rock. The meat truck sped off. He couldn't tell if it was a deliver van or one of Miller's mobile slaughter trucks. Why would anybody do something that stupid just as the sun was coming up? He hoped it was just another burlap bag full of pig parts or an old dog.

He drove down there and it turned out to be the body of a grown man. One he recognized. The body had the same long hair. The long nose and straight chin. The big hands. The same cracked and dusty feet. It wore the same white robe, now stained and torn. It lay across the torso above the waist leaving its erect genitals exposed. Deverle looked away and felt the earth slip. It came away from one more rusted support. The guy in the ditch was his christ. He went to the body and pulled the covering down over the waist. Deverle squat down and saw that the skin was the color of oatmeal. The deep gold hair was pale.

If we look far enough behind us, there is and always has been a prayer for decay. Somewhere forgotten, there are songs and chanted choruses that lift layers of dead skin and scatter the flakes along the tops of tall grass and corn stalks. It is always there and we think we know what it sounds like. What death says to us when we are prone to lyrical interludes. In churches, in front of moving images, at the feet of deathbed confessions and eulogies. But what it feels like, what it sounds like, what it smells like—where are our poems to the biles and split membranes, burst hearts and arteries? You gave us a body to tear apart, to mock and scorn, to burn, to rape, to construct and dissect, to worship. You told us to look inside and see just how infirm your construction. How grotesque and corrupt. How unnatural and out of place it is. In every bone and bit of

sinew, every fetid crevice, under each arm, spread across each tongue and the meat dangled between femurs there is poison, madness, corruption, deformities, and hopelessness. So many of these bodies in ditches, cold-dug, frozen-ground trenches made during wars fought on foot and horseback. Turned to ash and floated on wide, slow-moving rivers. Piled and burned, chained and dismembered. Forced to confess. This body. Here in this ditch. A filthy, foreign thing decomposing before a desperate man.

Jan Mack noticed someone in an old pick-up pull off to the side of the dirt road that ran parallel to his biggest Angus pasture. He jumped on to his three-wheeler and drove up on Deverle in the ditch poking the ground with a stick.

“Brother Christensen.”

“Jan, how you doin?”

“I can’t complain. How are you?”

“Alright.”

“Yeah?”

Jan stood and chewed on a plastic straw from his morning cup of coffee and fingered a rubber rooster hanging from his key chain.

“I got rid of most of that hoary cress all along here.”

“Yeah.”

“Dumped a bunch of road salt. Took care of it.”

“Hmm.”

Jan Mack didn’t see the body.

“Jan, you think we need to deepen this ditch?”

“Deverle, we ain’t had water run in here for twenty years.”

“I know that Brother Mack, but we might want to think about it.”

Deverle looked at the ground and what was there, in the weeds that Jan Mack couldn't see. Deverle couldn't show Jan what he found. Jan was the least active of the Mack brothers. Hadn't been to church in over a month.

“How's your boy doin'?”

“He's having a rough go.”

“He gonna come play ball this year?”

“No.”

“Kimber misses having him on the team.”

Jan took off his hat and stood at the side of the road. He was an awkward ape. Long legs bent backwards and knock-kneed. Long thin feet stuffed into high pointed cowboy boots. Big belly, thin, tripled combed hair stuck to a shiny scalp. A gum-chewer and a toothpick eater. His thin lips were always wet.

“How's Rebecca getting along at school?”

“Alright.”

“She break it off with that older Hostetler kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Brother Christensen, Is there something I can do for you?”

“I'll be out of your way here in a minute.”

Deverle saw the tip of three toes now coming up from under a young musk thistle. Nails black, deep bloody cracks between the toes.

“Brother Christensen, my lease on this drainage is up in five more years.”

“Jan, I'm not here to mess with your lease.”

“Give me two more years and we can talk about putting in some kind of culvert over to your fields.”

“I’m not here asking for that.”

“And I’ll get to my meetings as soon as I can.”

Deverle climbed out of the ditch.

“You tell Kimber to stay away from my boy.”

“Come on now, Deverle, that’s no kind way to be.”

Deverle got into his truck and sped off down the dusty road. He called himself a dumb son-of-a-bitch.

*Liver mortis*, or the second day.

Deverle returned the next morning after Jan and his brothers drove into town. The hair on the head of the body was white. The eyes dried up over night. The easy early light hit the exposed lens and reflected a pleasant blue-green glow. The nickel-plated John Deere emblem on Deverle’s keychain caught the tiny unfocused beams of aquamarine and reflected them back into the dry centers of the eye sockets. No nerves alive to understand the signal. No salt water, no tiny ocean between light and understanding. Soon red-tail hawks and turkey vultures would fight off magpies for the softer tissue. But suddenly there stood a California gull with a green grasshopper in its beak.

“Go on, git!”

Deverle kicked at the bird. It bounced back a couple steps and sucked on its morning meal. It slowly walked back to the corpse and hopped on to its chest.

“Arrogant, little shit.”

Deverle let it alone. He watched as the gull tore the fatty insect apart and swallowed the severed pieces. The gull cleaned a feather under its left wing, shook out the dust from its tail feathers and flew away. The quick burst of air from its takeoff blew the white hair off the body's head. A small cloud of ash rose and dissolved. The face now looked like nothing Deverle was shown as a kid. He was never taught to worship a body on a cross, only bodies that were white and whole. This body must have been the dark head of a larger meat animal or a covering that hid a pupae or a winged being. Deverle considered prying open the skull with a screwdriver to see what nested inside.

The third day, or *rigor mortis*.

The next morning the chest was full and rounded. It swole up during the night from the gas of feeding bacteria. The lips curled back, dried and thin. The teeth were perfectly straight. A silver sheen, not metallic but iridescent with all the shines between white and blue. A chalky residue rested gently on the face and covered the parted teeth and spread through the light beard over the jaw and chin onto the long neck.

*There should have been something growing from the open mouth. Some stemmed blossom rooted somewhere in the spine near the base of the skull. Some pale, silver-blue flowering plant with roots that punctured the skin at the back of the neck and punched tiny hair-thin roots into the wet ground under the body. There should have been some plant with a wide blossom that hid just out of view for a day, then broke free and widened the jaw and gapped the mouth. There should have been, but there wasn't. Only blue-grey teeth, passing silent air.*

In the early hours before he woke, Deverle was instructed not to touch the body, not to poke at it or bury it. No further instruction beyond *leave it be*, so he got in his truck and drove off toward the upper fields.

The final day, or *algor mortis*.

Before he ate his lunch on the fourth day, Deverle washed his face in the cool water of the Fountain. He took off his boots and waded in with bare feet. The Fountain made a low rumble. It buzzed the tips of his toes resting on sharp rocks. Sisters Fountain rumbled when it was ready to erupt. He waded in to his knees and waited. How high would it throw him? How long could he float in the cold water before his body would get stiff and sink? He dove in with his clothes on.

Deverle didn't visit the body that day. The magpies probably got to it. They harassed each other and hopped across the gravel to fight for shiny pits of foil and dried skin. They picked at the exposed gums, pecked the teeth, and pulled bits of tongue from the back of the mouth. Deverle floated, his ears just below the water line, cold and still, over the underground ocean, a thousand feet down. He listened for another rumble. He floated his arms. The surface tension fell slack. There was a warm up welling, a thicker fluid filled with more minerals, mixing for an explosion. How high would it send him? On top of an ocean, a thousand feet deep. A soft, pink, prick of life. You are buoyant after all.



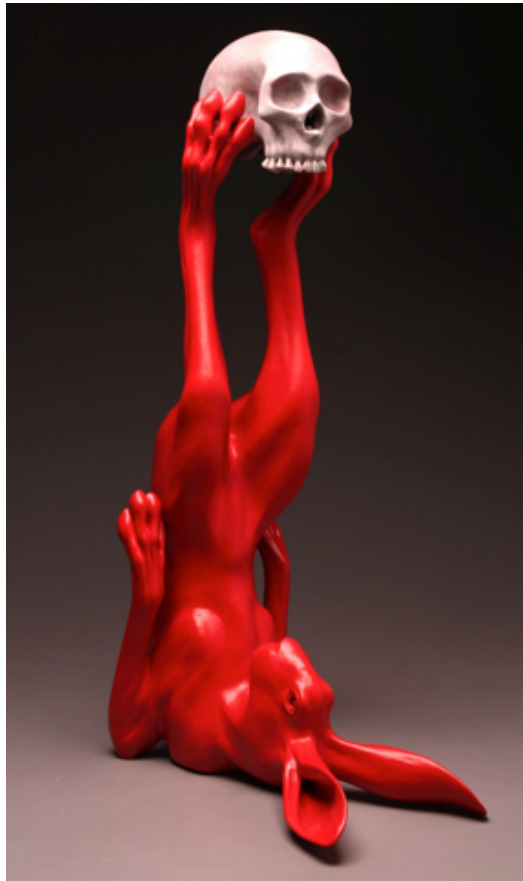
VI HARES



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RUSSELL WRANKLE  
*sculptor*

The hares showed up two weeks before the dam failed. One rose up on its hind legs over the top of Lanae's rose hedge one morning and scared her so bad she threw one of her great grandmother's porcelain coffee cups at it.

They must have come from Malad or further south. The heat that summer dried out the vegetation and brush fires burned over a million acres of grass and sage. The hares came into the valley looking for food.

Every morning the Mack brothers where out with shotguns, killing thirty or forty hares at a time before they could get into their alfalfa. The shotguns blasted the heads clean off, long ears and all. Where they could, the brothers collected the bodies and fed them to their pigs. But they kept coming. The hares took to the banks of the Bear River and in the ditches surrounding the Mack Brothers Angus corrals. They quickly mowed down and ate the large patches of Jim Hill mustard and yarrow. They spent the next twenty-four hours eating their own abundant feces produced from this banquet. Then they went looking for more food. They raided gardens and hay fields at night and chewed off the sweet bark of young birch trees the sisters planted in their ornamental gardens. The hares scratched out beds at the base of old juniper trees and giant sage brush and hid from red-tail hawks and golden eagles in the gullies made by irrigation ditches. Jan and Evan Mack got so mad they laid out rat poison that killed whole families of possums and gray squirrels. The sheriff came and Evan Mack yelled so loud at the officer he burst a blood vessel and was rushed to hospital. He was in bed for almost a month so Deverle sent David over to help Kimber manage the Angus. That's when David stumbled across Kimber molesting a young female Corrie.

As a kid David helped Kimber brand his animals. Kimber taught him to ride a horse. Kimber was tall, sandy brown hair and rode horses with his shirt off. From his family's dry and wilting wheat fields, David watched Kimber move sprinkler pipe and turn sod with bright red tractors and ride his prized Arabian horses along the track that ran the length of the fence between the Macks' green pastures and the poor dirt of the Christensen dry farm. Deverle couldn't afford water rights from the dam. The Macks always out-bid him, but they always had work for Deverle and his sons. Summers for David meant working in the dry heat and looking for ways to get Kimber Mack to go shirt-less and show off.

David walked onto the Mack property unannounced. Nobody told Kimber he was coming. Kimber had the ewe tied to the fence post, her front legs were hobbled, his Levis down to his ankles, his shirt off. The hard muscles of his back, tense under a layer of brown skin, were anchored firmly to his dense pelvis beneath the two indentations at the small of his back. Just above a round, white ass dusted with blond hair. David ducked into a small calving shed and pushed his face up against a small knothole. It was the most David had ever seen of Kimber Mack and the sight made him feeble. The move forward of his hips, the clench, then the opening up of the rounds of Kimber's backside spoke some faint ancient erotic language that no human being left on the earth fully understood. But then David saw the sheep in front of Kimber struggle. It bucked its head back and knocked Kimber off balance. The sheep let out a shrill bleat. Its hobbled front legs disturbed the fine dirt. Kimber tightened the rope. David's heart beat through the vessels behind his eyes. He was faint and short of breath and reached for the buttons in the crouch of his denims. But the bleat came again—a confused and gagged howl. David

pushed back from the hole and sat up against the old barn wood. He didn't notice he sat himself in pig manure mixed with straw. He suddenly noticed the smell. He heard the car tires of a new Chevy Bronco roll over the gravel of the driveway. David forced his breath to slow and his mind to sift through the sudden inventory of thousands of unexplained absences. So many instances when his brothers and sisters went unaccounted for — times when they were *gone somewhere with Kimber*.

Through a crack in the wood David watched Kimber scoop up his wife around the waist as she stepped out of the car. Two small children clung to each of his thick legs. He dragged them all into the house. He set the kids in front of the TV and took his wife into the bedroom and fucked her.

Later, Kimber would chew on sunflower seeds as he tugged at the rope tied around an old Holstein as he attempted to get her pregnant one last time before she was shot dead and fed to pigs. Kimber held her as the arm of a crusty ranch hand penetrated the ass of the old milk cow. Deep to the elbow, the ranch hand gripped her uterus through the wall of her rectum and shot semen into her cervix as she struggled, immobilized, caught by the neck between two tall metals poles. The ranch hand pulled out quickly, arm covered in shit, and slapped the old cow on the ass.

*Kimber's wife, surely named, lays on the master bed with the pinky of her left hand between her front teeth. She thinks to empty out Kimber's ejaculate in the master bath, but the warm deposit is her comfort. A breeze through the screen on the bedroom window. Through the window, she sees Kimber remove the hobble and lead the ewe back to its pen.*

This is what to you? This biology, this husbandry. Though you may look away when you are drawn the picture and become squeamish as the practice begins, you will allow the congress. You will not call it sex because you and your children are hungry. You are exhausted and cannot be bothered to nurse your own young. Your body is small and vulnerable and flat-chested. It has been selected for pleasure but is unable to give birth. Your babies are cut from you. You can't bear to look at yourself so you cover your torn and scarred flesh with color and cream and the skins of slowly-slaughtered things. Your milk never reaches your infant's mouth. You charge their feeding to barren women who nourish infants with plastics and powders made by companies run by men in dark suits with blue veins and pallid complexions who buy prostitutes and cough when they laugh. You are safe. You, wives, surely named.

On his way back to the house, David met Paul carrying two bloody rabbit carcasses.

"Where have you been?"

"Jan Mack said I could come with him to hunt the jacks."

"Get in the house!"

"Dad said I could."

"Get in the house."

*fuck you*

"What did you say?"

"I'm gonna show Kimber these jacks!"

David knocked Paul to the ground. He pushed Paul's face into the dirt and put a knee to the back of his neck.



“You’re going back to the house.”

David’s breath got away from him and poured out his mouth in bitter irregular waves.

“You hear me? You’re gonna go back.”

Paul’s eyes welled with tears. He body shuddered, pinned against an earth that was suddenly stony.

*get off me*

“You going back?”

*yes*

Paul’s arms and hands shook as he took up the bloody rabbits. He reached for Deverle’s shotgun.

“Leave it.”

Paul’s lip bled. His stomach turned as all young stomachs do in boys the first time they’re struck. Paul cried behind clenched teeth. He quickly walked away and threw the dead jack rabbits into the canal.

The hares moved onto people’s lawns. They confronted Lanae’s cats. They chewed up her irises and tulips. Their leaves were sweet and full of water. Mary helped Lanae hold them off with a broom and fists full of rock salt. The two old cat lovers sat in a couple of rocking chairs on Lanae’s back porch. Lanae was childless and unkept and made all her own clothes from men’s flannel shirts and corduroy. Mary was motherless for all but an hour of her young life. She would be childless too. Her genitals were stitched together and wired without a good blueprint. They were feral bits of flesh pieced together for the kinds of pleasures few can conceive of. Lanae was the only woman who knew about Mary. She was the only person Deverle ever truly trusted.

“How you gonna get that salt at them?”

“Throw it.”

“Where’s your wrist rocket?”

“Lost it.”

“That’d really give them a wallop. You left-handed?”

“Yea.”

“Good. You let them have it when you see them.”

Lanae sat in the old rocker with a .22 across her lap. She didn’t care to examine what the Lord had blessed Mary with when Deverle invited her to take a look. Lanae had never even explored herself. Nor had anyone else. Her hymen came apart when she was seventeen while she rode her father’s appaloosa Charlie Chicken Bone. As they came into Tony Grove over the White Pine trail, Chicken Bone stepped onto a loose patch of shale scree and lost his balance. To avoid a fall he ran down the steep incline that nearly threw Lanae over the reins. She leaned back as far as she could in her dad’s new saddle and squeezed her legs around the horse as tightly as she could. That put extreme pressure between her legs. The bloody thing snapped and there she was, a lady! The between-the-leg kind of pleasure was, for Lanae, always and only on the back of a horse. The gentle rocking of her favorite mare Harriet, moved through her tight jeans and with the aid of those special pairs of underwear that came in the mail, a twenty-minute trail ride was all the doctor ordered. Sometimes she’d ride up onto the horn or slide back and forth on the smooth leather and throw her head back and stare into the sky. The pleasure was between her legs but also thinly stretched across the fabric of an unknown green force field that for so many days in a row when she was a young girl, made blue skies without clouds.

The pleasure was between her legs but also in the hot dust that dissolved into irrigation spray and settled on fresh hay and barley and corn during twilight. The pleasure was between her legs but also it was the moon in midnight summer rides on top of Round Hill. It was spring mornings through the apple groves, scattering Jewel Smith's sheep and flirting with Jan Mack while he milked the Holstein. Her pleasure was between her legs but also in the toes of her favorite boots, in the first warm breeze of the day on the first trickle of sweat at the back of her neck. She knew the pleasure of the horse. She never bothered to look at herself there and see how things figured. She stared at the ceiling when she washed herself with a cloth and dried it with a towel. Her bare knuckles or fingertips had never been close to doing the work of a good saddle and a cool summer sunset. She had come to an agreement with her god and they were perfectly fine with the arrangement.

The day Deverle told her about Mary it was unseasonably cool, 74 degrees. They sat on her porch and drank purple punch with ice and dipped celery stalks into peanut butter. Lanae didn't quite know exactly what he was telling her. But her faith was as absolute as Deverle's was troubled. If it ain't hid to God, it ain't hid to the rest of us. She mentioned Mary in every prayer for fourteen years.

*Everything down there's a mess no matter how you look at it. Flaps and folds and hills and gullies and unexplained patches of wild hair. No need to explain it or give it a name or lay a knife to it. God, let her find a warm body that loves her.*

In the middle of that night, a small figure wandered into Deverle's bedroom.

Dad.

Deverle woke to a dark shape standing over him. He shot out of bed and cussed. It was Paul scratching the back of his head, wearing Alma's pajamas.

"Paul, sweetheart what are you doing?"

"I saw a red jack today."

"Come here buddy."

Deverle sat up on the edge of his bed. Paul climbed onto his lap and sunk into his father's embrace. Nights when Paul was sleepwalking were the only nights Deverle could hold this kid.

"Now tell me again what you saw."

"A red jack."

"A red jack? I've never heard of such a thing."

"They're real, you know?"

"Yeah?"

"It put its butt up at me?"

"Yeah?"

"Like a leap-frog."

"Did you jump over it?"

"No. I just looked at her and she put her butt up in the air for a long time and didn't move."

"You think it was a she?"

"She was mad."

"I don't think she was mad."

"It was the mom. Maybe I killed her kids."

“She can have a lot more kids. A jack doesn’t know that she’s lost babies. She only knows that she can always make more.”

“With her butt?”

“No, but there ‘bouts.”

“In her gentles?”

“That’s right.”

“Why are gentles so close to butts?”

“I don’t know buddy?”

“Why is that jack red?”

“I don’t know that either.”

Deverle rocked Paul to sleep, his freckled and buck-toothed marauder. If Paul had grown to adulthood, this little boy would have committed horrible crimes. Paul was always anxious and couldn’t sit still. He didn’t listen to adult instruction. He had the chemistry of raw meat and saw the world through fences and dirty windshields. The water would take him as a child and tumble his soft skin from his bones between jagged boulders and the last thing he would think about would be the death of the coyote, starved by his expert trapping skill. Paul and his father slept next to each other and both dreamed of red jackrabbits and wet rocks.

Mary and Lanae fell asleep and within a couple of early morning hours the jacks had eaten every tulip leaf and iris blossom. They dug under the wire mesh of her vegetable garden and chewed the pea plant to pieces. The hares ate through the fields of young moist alfalfa, killed rose gardens and swallowed row after row of potato starts. The sheriff wrote the Mack Brothers 35 tickets for the illegal discharge of a firearm within

city limits. The Brothers finally stopped shooting the hares when Fish and Game showed up and wrote them checks for the damage done to their hay. The game guys decided the jacks had been pushed east from Malad by all the brush fires and more were on the way.

For the next two weeks Paul hunted every day for the red jack. Deverle hid all his shotguns so Paul used dirt clods and slingshots. The hares got into Jewel Smith's sheep feed. They ate most of it and then shit in the rest. Jacks are animals that not only shit were they eat, they eat what they shit. They eat their feces two and three times before their guts get what they need. Except maybe the red jack. Maybe she survives in some other way. Had Paul lived, he may have made a great discovery.

It was early morning, the Sunday before the dam gave out. Thousands of hares overran the valley. The moon was about to set. The first colors of the sunrise were still an hour away. The night hadn't cooled. It was 81 degrees. The mustang was nervous. David sat on the old corral fence chewing at a callous on his right palm. His rage would have him chew it down to the bone. He worked over the list of all the wrongs the Mack Brothers had wrought on the Christensen family. Out-bidding his father for water rights, sometimes by a single cent, to keep their farm dry. Offering work for wages they couldn't refuse to clean the decks of the Angus barns or pile the corn silage or shovel shit. The Mack Brothers coached every kid's sports team there was. Each of Deverle's boys quit those teams for reasons still not fully understood. Evan Mack, with his blocked skull, thick lips and tight crew cut, was also the Scout Master and the most senior member of the High Council. The boys were left behind from camping trips because of unpaid Boy Scout bills. All the service projects required for advancement in the priesthood took place on the Mack Farm. The Christensen boys picked rocks off acres of tilled soil so the

stones wouldn't dent the tiller blades. The boys helped birth the Mack cattle. They moved pipe and tended babies and repaired feed sheds and shoveled snow. All unpaid work that always offset some unpayable debt. Whenever the boys did stupid shit Deverle went to Evan Mack to intervene on their behalf. They were forced into confessions, behind locked doors in Evan Mack's home office, to avoid Bishop's Courts that would have led to excommunications.

David didn't eat for a day. He chewed the callous until it turned pink. He thought to cut up Kimber's Arabians himself. Or call the Sheriff. But David had been caught riding his horse naked across the Bear River during a spring surge. He even told Evan Mack about the thoughts he had about guys, which somehow led to David's early disqualification from the State Wrestling meet. No one would believe David's accusation or the description of what he saw.

*How thrilling the sight of Kimber's backside, even as it hovered at the butt-end of a bound animal.*

David jumped off the fence and kicked open the corral gate. He jumped on the Mustang bareback and ran the fence line to the corner of the Mack property. He picked the old lock on the gate and rode the Mustang into the stable where the new Arabian mare was kept. The Mustang reared back. The Mare stepped in a nervous fit. The Mustang could smell her. The Mare was in heat. The Mustang tore the lead from David's hand and ran the length of the building. David slammed the big doors shut to keep the Mustang inside. He had not a single thought for an explanation should Kimber hear all this and come out from the house. He opened the door to the Mare's stall. The Mustang rose up and fell down and kicked up sawdust and cedar chips. David got him into the stall with

the Mare and watched to make sure he got inside her. The Mare was unable to turn around. She bit the metal bars of the divider and gnawed on the pine planks of the stall door. The activity was loud and violent and it made the air of the stable damp and sweetly foul.

Once it was all over, David took the lead and walked the Mustang home just as the first bit of black sky turned to a deep morning purple. He turned the Mustang back into the corral and fed it oats and the carrots he stole from Lanae's compost.



## VII BREACH

## THE MILK OF MILLENNIA

*I am part of the load  
not rightly balanced.  
I drop off in the grass,  
like the old cave sleepers, to browse  
wherever I fall.*

*For hundreds of thousands of years I have been dust grains  
floating and flying in the will of the air,  
often forgetting ever being  
in that state, but in sleep  
I migrate back. I spring loose  
from the four-branched, time-and-space cross,  
this waiting room.*

*I walk into a huge pasture.  
I nurse the milk of millennia.  
Everyone does this in different ways.  
Knowing that conscious decisions  
and personal memory  
are much too small a place to live,  
every human being streams at night  
into the loving nowhere, or during the day,  
in some absorbing work.*

RUMI

*poet*

COLEMAN BARKS

*poet translator*

Water always finds weakness. It hunts for the finest sediment. It craves removal, redistribution and disturbance of the most delicate particle. All that is fluid is inherently violent. All that is loosely bound, layered, unrooted, blown, will be radically transformed.

The dry farm was gullied, bounded and cut-through by ravines, draws, a gulch, and innumerable right-angled furrows. The ghosts of water were everywhere—phantasms and the language of weakness. The explanations of why one sediment can't adhere to the next, why one substrate betrays another.

Deverle stood in a field of fat sugar beets thriving in the Trenton fine sandy loam that covered the floodplain below Cutler Dam. He was about to be crushed by thousands of acre-feet of water. The Bear River Valley was flat and 15,000 years before Deverle fathered his silly kids, it was under 800 hundred feet of water. He couldn't have lived under the tide of that inland sea, how did he think could survive there below a shoddy dam holding back water that cared little for the memory of people who farmed from faith alone?

Water has time. Water patiently waits for things to stop resisting. It waited fifteen years before it found the hairline crack in the cement at the bottom of the dam.

When Mary saw the whirlpool above the dam the smoke from the Cub River fire was thick and her chest hurt. The dull orange light filled the valley and turned all waters black. The whirlpool moved in gentle turns around a hollow cone that reached down two hundred feet. There, the water had found weakness in porous bedrock made from basalt and limestone. Sticks and leaves and the always agreeable bits of plastic spun cordially into the dark hole. A wet gasp. A sucking, slight and unoffensive. Mary fed the dark

water-gullet dirt clods and dead thistle leaves. She counted the revolutions before each were dragged under.

Six hundred yards from the base of the dam downstream, Alma and Paul pulled the heads off termite larvae living in the wood of the old Lesley barn. Three high-pressure springs appeared next to the carriage house six months earlier running clear and grew stronger every month. Each spring made its own small pond and the boys were often swimming there with cattails and marsh grass. The water came for them first. The largest spring belched thick murky water and covered the boys. It knocked them down and took their breath. They laughed and threw mud at each other. Paul covered his teeth with the dark silt and gave Alma a big slimy grin. The spring boiled again with fantastic force. The swell took their feet out from under them. They choked and scrambled for the embankment that led to the dirt road above the floodplain. The water took Alma. Paul scratched his way to the top of the riverbank. He rested on his hands and knees and violently coughed up water and fine sediment and a tiger's eye agate marble lost in 1910 by a kid waiting for his father's construction shift to end. Water dripped from the end of his nose onto the marble in his hand. He rolled it around and polished off the encrusted clay. It glowed amber then deep vermillion as Paul moved it back and forth in the sunlight. Layers of pink and deep purple ran in hair-thin bands around its equator. The biggest treasure he had ever found. The crest of surging water undercut the weak earthen overhang. The sandy bank collapsed. The muddy rapid swallowed Paul and his tiny jewel.

Deverle stood a hundred yards from the foot of the dam when he saw the seep open up. His swollen head, full of beet sugar and red meat. His loose gravel heart rattling inside the concave of his chest.

*Oh God, hear the words of my mouth.*

He could have said the dam wept or it had pissed itself or ejaculated or that it sweat from the dry hot air. He could have said it was a stain, scratched open and spit on by the god of damp earth. The god of waters. The god of the lone and dreary world. He could have said the seep was a tear or a wet dream or forgiveness.

*Oh God, hear the words of my mouth.*

He turned to scream for his kids and the seep opened up. The dam gave way. The blast filled his throat full of sand and sludge. Gravel peeled back his eyelids. The water lifted him and slammed his body into the electric pole erected in 1910 by Janus Lesley. The first bit of power generated from the new dam. The blow snapped Deverle's spine. The water bent his backward body around the pole. This must have been the moment of Deverle Christensen's death. It's hard to say. The water tore off his clothes. The larger riprap boulders broke his left arm and caved in his chest. The sheared branches from the giant cottonwoods that grew along the river just below the dam punctured his heart and ripped open his abdomen and exposed the organs of his gut. They washed out and crows found them floating near Jewel Smith's tractor marooned by the flood on top of a Mack Brother's manure pile.

The water rolled Michael's trailer. Sarah was with him. They were inside sleeping off a night of whiskey and marijuana. The water shattered glass and threw them both into the sharp edges of the broken windows. Michael bled to death from a cut throat. Sarah

took in water and quickly drowned. The trailer floated and rolled for two hundred yards and smashed through the roof of the new duplex.

Rebecca and Elisabeth slept inside with their babies. Both their husbands were off running cattle for the Mack brothers. Both new mothers were crushed by debris. The babies were buried under thirty feet of mud. Neither one was ever found.

David was gone. His horse was gone. His clothes, the dirt bike, the cash under the stairs, gone. He left sometime during the previous week. He had run-ins with the Hostetler brothers. Got beat and robbed by a trucker from Oklahoma who solicited him for sex. He may have gone to California. Maybe north to Canada. Somewhere where there were big cities. The right and natural place for kids like him. It's hard to say just where or when he died, or how. Maybe he's still alive.

Mary watched as helpless as all human witnesses are when we stand before acts of horrible rupture. Helpless these million years since we decided we were different. When we first thought there were words that could be said to turn rivers into giant calm-water pools. When we thought there might be words to tame winds and make heat from moving metal and teach meat animals to hold still. The urge came to throw herself into the torrent, to fall headlong onto jagged rocks, to cut her own throat, or ride a large log over the slick and crystal clear aquamarine at the top of the breach. The hundred foot cliffs of human tamped dirt that built the dam fell into the silken flow and quickly dissolved. The water widened until all weakness stopped resisting. Mary called it a gap. It was terrible but it abided. The gap was ambivalent but sensible. There weren't feet fast enough to run to a siren or call for a helicopter or ring a church bell. Instead something

burst. A vessel behind her eye, a membrane between her legs. A tense strap, somewhere had been cut. She sat as spaces were drained and new ones were filled in.

At the edge of the breach Mary saw whirlpools emerge along the edges of the fast water, then stretch and get pulled apart. More appeared, some small and stubborn, some wide and lazy, looking to turn fast enough to swallow the entire flow of the reservoir and force it deep underground into the ocean that lay far below her. Whirlpools always at the edges, never in the middle rapid, or on the crest of the fall. All of them spinning around long columns of empty space, opened shafts of air boring through the violent water to the rocky bottom where fissures and holes in the rock lead into springs and underground rivers, to Sisters Fountain. The breach would kill the geyser. There would be no more eruptions. No more bursts of cool water into the hot August days of the Bear River Valley. Relief from the rising summer temperatures would have to come from some other where.

Mary's magpie came and pecked at the metal of her belt buckle as she sat above the water. But that was of little comfort. There would be no eagle come from an overhead somewhere to ride her above what she saw, to make it all look small and made up. Mary could never again pretend there were giant birds big enough to saddle.

Mary finds it unremarkable, the water. The whirlpools at the edges, the eruptions, the springs, the hauntings of caverns deep underground. It is beautiful and there is no sorrow. Not for eight dead siblings and two infants or for a father who had been without his companion these fifteen years. But can I make such a claim as Mary sits here, as huge bits of earth fall out from underneath her and she decides what to do with her body. She and I are strangely configured. The tissues and the muscles and the nerves and the new

growth of hair between her legs, the strange flesh network that still responds to touch and curiosity. She puts fingers to those places, one just inside an opening, another at the tip of a stiffening. Mary is not a new messiah, but a single point of spinning matter around empty space, anchored to a rocky core. Nor am I your answer. I am a temporary disturbance. I am a whirlpool caused by the death of Susan Lesley. I am all that is left of what used to be Deverle's wife. And I am not to be changed.

I'm not the power of the moon or dark clouds or thunder. I am from nowhere overhead. I'm not the fat figure you made from clay. Don't pray to me or think I give a damn about your body and what it can and cannot do. I don't balance between your night and day. I will ignore any offering that thinks itself incomplete and begs for intercession. From what after all? That thick gathering overhead you believe continues to cleave single bits into equal halves. Sit in it, without any help. Sit in it and finger it, erect it and wear it down. Guess which sediment contains me. You may see me there. But in which layer?

Mary walked away from the water. Sweat ran from her neck, over her chest and stomach and soaked the top of her belted jeans. Her magpie followed. She picked purple scotch thistle blossoms and disassembled the segments of long stalks of spider grass. She got to the Junction just as Stephen fell from the roof of the house into the raging water as it tore the structure off its foundation and crushed it against farm equipment and floating grain silos. He quickly drowned.

Mary looked to see what familiar train cars were parked on the tracks. She recognized none of them. The cars were clean. The cars were stripped of all the city art, sand-blasted by a rail worker in Durango. She climbed into the front car and sat in the corner. She rested her head against the rusted metal. She lifted her knees to her chest and



let her legs fall open. Heavy streams of sweat pooled in her navel and spilled onto the leather of the belt Alma tooled for her in shop class. She reached between her legs and found herself there. The charged roar of the breach deafened all other careful senses. Her thumb and finger moved in and under and around the unordinary concaves and swellings that made up her in-between. There were more than two bits and no discreet patterns. Mary found the unexplainable pleasure of particles.

Then came that odd cool breeze that everyone in Lesley had a different name for—the sisters' breath, a coyote breeze, an Alaska wind. It came two or three times every summer, probably up from underground. The surface wind on the underground ocean forced up by some flood-swollen subterranean stream. However it came, it burst into the dry valley and cooled the air. It dried the sweat along Mary's forehead and over her chest and along the leather belt. Brilliant white salt stains dusted the wings of bald eagles and sunflowers and barbed wire that Alma had so carefully punched into the leather of the belt with a rusted awl.

The snowy stains remained on that belt until Mary passed away years later. The dents and raised edges of the leather carefully held the salt, the leftovers of the resurrection of the water behind Cutler Dam.

Mary and I are not finalities. Don't think us ones. We carry only the weight of our own velocities. We are single points of spinning matter that whirl around empty spaces that are anchored to rocky cores. We may go into the world and cause people pain. We may be selfish and destructive. We may never love or share a breakfast table or light a light. We may set things on fire. We may never be noticed by anyone of consequence. We are worth only the pleasure we bring to ourselves. We are not to be changed.

## VIII MINDS OUT OF BODIES: QUEER MATERIALISM AND THE ECOLOGICAL METAPHOR

*Cultures can change much faster than bodies evolve.*

—Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

### *Introduction*

In the St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague hangs a curiously crucified Christ. It has all the traditional Christian iconographies, the crown of thorns, the loincloth, the small foot pedestal. But at the hands there is a deliberate and unorthodox placement of the nails. They're hammered through the wrists and not into the palms. This artistic depiction is rare. In the vast canon of visual art depicting the crucifixion, the nails remain steadfastly driven through the palms. This is the site on the crucified body where the religious sign, the stigmata, firmly roots itself.

An interesting parallel occurs in one of the many Mormon Temple ceremonies. To be admitted into the inner sanctum of the temple, the worshipper is asked to offer a series of special “tokens” or handshakes to the temple worker through openings cut in a large veil. One of these handshakes is given the name “the sign of the nail.” The middle finger and thumb are placed on either side of the receiver’s flattened palm marking the traditional placement of the crucifixion nails. The name of the handshake following this is “the sure sign of the nail.” This “token” is a regular handshake, but with pinkies interlocked and forefinger and middle finger pressed to the inside of the partner’s wrist.

This marks a spot that, like the giant wood crucifix, reveals a material reality that is hotly debated in both secular and religious communities with regard to how the crucifixion of Jesus took place. The weight of a male body would rip through the placement of the nails in the palms and the sufferer would fall to the ground. The wrist, strengthened by thicker tendons and bone articulations, seems to be the more realistic placement for the nails. Even the Shroud of Turin suggests this more material placement. Why has the stigmata not moved to the wrist? Why is religious signification still separate from material weight?

There is a dialogic in progress in these examples between a religious sign and a material reality — the nails hammered through the palms versus driven through the wrists. The weight of the material logistics of keeping the meat of a human body suspended for the duration of its dying, pulls on the religious metaphor, the stigmata, the spiritual signification of submission and sacrifice. My exploration of the space between the material and the metaphoric places us inside this conversation. Which sign holds the weight — the sign of the nail or the “sure” sign of the nail?

This distinction is no small thing as we examine the creation of religious metaphor and how that process influences how we choose metaphors when we speak about human ecology. Is there a way to create ecological metaphors that reflect material reality, ones that are not the conceptual offspring of any particular religious iconographies? Can we reimagine religious metaphor with a new kind of materialism that brings human bodies, particularly our reproductive biology, into closer conversation with our belief systems, our mythologies, our bedtime stories, our disturbing dreams and ecstatic religious visions?

Authors like Wendell Berry, Alan Burdick, William Cronon, as well as the great thinker Joseph Campbell, all examine the “limits of metaphor,” particularly the failure of religious metaphor to help humans create a healthier material ecology. Joseph Campbell believed “a new mythology is rapidly becoming a necessity both socially and spiritually as the metaphors of the past, such as the Virgin Birth and the Promised Land, misread consequently as fact, lose their vitality and become concretized” (Campbell 6). These are metaphors that have lost their connections to a materiality that can potentially “make manifest the radiance of the world just as it is, rather than arguing it should be one way or the other” (6).

Several central questions reveal themselves as we start this exploration. How do we conceptually inhabit, confront and reassess the realities of a changing biosphere? How do we live, creatively and philosophically, with nonhuman mass extinctions caused by a virulent procreative human culture? How do we talk about ecological consequence outside the old religious semioses that still haunt the ethics of environmental discourse? It may be time to jostle, disturb and dissect our social and ecological constructions based on *paradises, edens, resurrections, heavens, hells* and *sacred children*.

I explore queer materialism for two distinct purposes — to help define it and to use queer materialism as a tool to reimagine the construction of ecological metaphor. I want to explore the material (a)effects when discourse about queer lives and bodies merges with language used in ecological studies. I’ll use the concept of the *ecotone* to begin our discussion of how sites of transition can trouble metaphors of wholeness. An ecotone is a place where different ecological communities meet and integrate. These are sites where ecologies are always in tension.

In part, this exploration addresses concerns of the many reported deaths of queer theory outlined in Michael O'Rourke's (2011) "The Afterlives of Queer Theory." O'Rourke cites Valerie Rohy from her article (2011) "Busy Dying," where she gives an oddly faint, material description of this possible death, "[...] the condition of life is its ending. And if so, the question becomes how long and richly queer theory can live that dying, busy with the work of its time." (219)

To "live a dying" is a phrase that, in this work, will wind its way from Lee Edelman's queer theoretical perspective — the Child as futurism's monster — into Timothy Morton's ecophilosophical concept "dark ecology," and then rest in a creative construction, the *queer sublime*, inspired by Gerorge Bataille's concept of the *Jesuve*.

The conversation between these concepts and religious metaphor will help us figure queer bodies as human ecotones. This figuration can include many sexual orientations, sociologies, and self-constructed identities. For our purposes, a queer body is *any* nonprocreative body. This body is a site of pollution, decomposition, transition, and transformation. It is a darker, more troubling and unexpectedly explosive aspect of the sublime.

### *Human Reason and the Immaterial*

Religious metaphor presupposes that human rationality can, through ritual, make sense of our nagging feeling of separate-ness, of being other than a part of the world. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche takes us back to the Attic roots of western religious and artistic traditions and outlines how the ancient Dionysiac rituals, the dythramb, the explosive dismemberment and blood rituals of the old rites, gave way to the Apolline, a

rationality born from human reason that convinced the mind that the signification of the sacrifice was more important than the sacrifice itself.

Nietzsche's central idea, one that is compelling in our current ecological context, is whether the Greeks' "ever more intense *craving for beauty*, for festivals, entertainments, grew out of a lack, out of deprivation, melancholy, pain" (Nietzsche 6). Nietzsche explores why the Greeks moved away from the Dionysiac religious rituals which were steeped in the "the *craving for ugliness*; the good, rigid, resolve of the older Greeks for pessimism, for the tragic myth, for the image of everything terrible, evil, cryptic, destructive and deadly underlying existence..." (6). Nietzsche's polemic moves counter-intuitively. As the Greek societies grew more diverse and splintered, as they reached middle age they sensed their own decay. The Greeks, "precisely at the point of their dissolution and weakness became ever more optimistic, superficial, theatrical, more and more ardent for logic and a logical interpretation of the world, and thus more 'cheerful' and more 'scientific'" (7). Nietzsche's assertion poses a powerful question. Are there "neuroses of *health*" (7)?

The rational Apolline mind took hold of Greek institutions and the Dionysiac becomes invested in the tragedies of Sophocles and the comic art of Euripides. The dythramb, the entranced chanting, the repetitive animalistic movements, became the Greek chorus of the Attic tragedies. The veneration of the material body moved from real dismemberment and blood ritual to representation and theatrical enactment. The mask over an actor showing the bloody tracks of Oedipus' terrible act replaced the actual sacrifices of the bull and the mutilation of human bodies. The cathartic release of fear becomes confined to the psychic realm as the individual is distanced from a personal

material experience of the Dionysiac madness that, if we partially align ourselves with Nietzsche's view, is the celebration of youth and youthfulness.

Here, in opposition to the Dionysiac, Nietzsche explains how the Apolline, realized though human rationality, may have something to hide:

Might we not assume — in the face of all 'modern ideas' and prejudices of democratic [capitalistic?] taste — that the victory of optimism, the now predominant *reason*, practical and theoretical utilitarianism, like democracy itself, with which it is coeval, is a symptom of waning power, of approaching senescence, of physiological fatigue? (7)

Are not so many of our bodies showing signs of this physiological fatigue as they become more obese, diabetic, asthmatic and inactive? And so many of our minds manifest psychic fatigue, craving ever more grand theatrics, technologies — ever more complex sciences and mathematics. The more we sense decay — this physiological and psychic fatigue — the more rational, scientific, and theatrical we become. Nietzsche's notion of the Dionysiac has a place in the discussion of ecological metaphor and a reimagined ecological storytelling.

Dionysiac art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal delight of existence[...] It wishes us to acknowledge that everything that comes into being must be prepared to face a sorrowful end. It forces us to look at the terrors of individual existence, yet we are not to be petrified with fear. A metaphysical consolation wrests us momentarily from the bustle of changing forms. For a brief moment we really become the primal essence itself, and feel its unbounded lust for existence and delight in existence. Now we see the struggles, the torment, the destruction of phenomena as necessary, given the constant proliferation of forms of existence forcing and pushing their way into life, the exuberant fertility of the world will. We are pierced by the raging goad of those torments just as we become one with the vast primal delight in existence and sense the eternity of that delight in Dionysiac ecstasy. For all our pity and terror we are happy to be alive, not as individuals but as *the* single living thing, merged with its creative delight. (80-81)

As the Apolline, human rationality, reason and the veneration of all things illuminate, merged with Christianity, so too did the iconography. The halo and cross, the

early Hellenistic symbols of Apollonian wisdom and Helios the sun god, were assigned to a resurrected Jesus Christ. The satyr, cloven-hooved, horned, the leader of the ecstatic Dionysiac processions, becomes the conceptual manifestation of Satan — the ultimate adversary of light and Prince of Darkness. Satan is the celebration of materiality, this “Dionysiac ecstasy,” that in the Christian mythology leads one into the earth, into hell underground and a fiery, eternally agonistic existence. What is striking about this separation is that, in material terms, the biological body really does return to the earth. The modern humanist mind, looking to the biological sciences as modes of perception, can claim Satan, the ancient satyr, as a patron saint.

Meanwhile a resurrected and perfected body is a religious metaphor that lacks material explanation. A risen body, looking to the resurrected Christ as patron, becomes associated, by way of religious and cultural lineage, with the Apolline, rationality and human reason. By the time we get to Emmanuel Kant the chasm between mind and body is so complete and disorienting, the rational man now believes in an immaterial event, the resurrection. The fallen man, degenerate, sinful, material — the *natural* man — is now the enemy to God, securely bedded down in Satan’s camp, worshipping what represents actual material aspects of the body — that it dies and is buried. The hell of the underground is where the body *actually* goes. But the socially constructed mind rises up with the signification of the resurrected body, to a perfected residence, leaving behind the lone and dreary world. And here we find ourselves, with mind and body, so desperate in our attempts to either recreate Heaven on earth or to evacuate our material realities as quickly as we can.



*Ecology and Religious Metaphor*

Eden was an odd place. Did this Adam walk without genitals in the days before shame, before he (it) was spilt apart? Alone before woman, before human procreativity, was he endowed? If there was no death, no reason to keep oneself fed, then there were no bowels or internal organs or bodily fluids and no need for male genitalia. Those earliest times in the garden are odd gender-less and sex-less times. In terms of reworking that Judeo-Christian semiosis, it is helpful to recognize the sites of epistemic privilege that generated these sign systems.

Jacques Derrida's examination of the shenanigans in Eden helps to examine how creation myths become entrenched environmental discursive markers. As the creator of the garden, and in need of names for things he had made, Jehovah brings the animals to Adam (considered man without woman, so not really a man yet, but an *adam*). To initiate man's earthly *stewardship* (enter the world's first great ecometaphor), Jehovah "lets Adam, lets man, man alone, Ish without Ishah, without woman, freely call out the names. He lets him indulge in the naming all by himself" (Derrida, *Animal* 29). Man is set up as the namer, the decider, supervised, but allowed to make up the categories all on his own. Steward becomes the metaphor for man's masculine mandate that will inspire him to move mountains and will bestow upon him supernatural powers. These excess powers go beyond man's basic survival functions. As a steward, Adam, man, acquires virtual human powers that shape nature into abstract, opaque, conceptual constructions. These things-now-named, these presexual, protobeasts living with Adam in Eden, share a kinship with

Kant's things-in-themselves, those veiled conceptual molds that help spawn our Edenic metaphors, the very ones Nietzsche would have us reconsider. "We believe we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers, and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities" (Nietzsche 55). Hence, human virtuality, abstract thought, a projected meta-consciousness, and things-in-themselves, become the many configurations of a ghostly scaffolding that frame and support these manifestations of excess. "In order to heighten his pleasure, man deliberately increases his needs, which were originally only a little more difficult to satisfy than those of the animal; hence luxury, delicacies, tobacco, opium, alcoholic liquors, pomp, display, and all that goes with this" (Schopenhauer 4). Biting off more than we can chew, materially and metaphorically.

### *The Whole World in His Hands*

In the writing of early American naturalists, Nature is grand and glorious, boldly stamped with a capital N, but above and beyond us. It is a world where man intrudes. Nature is a complex constellation of religious and celestial metaphors. John Muir's religious experience chronicled in *My First Summer in the Sierra* from 1911 takes place in the "Grand Sierra Cathedral," made of "living rock." Aesthetic arrest, a visual rapture, comes to Muir in the form of "the most beautiful mass of yellow light I ever beheld." A sight "that comes to us but once in a lifetime." Lunar rainbows, colors of the sun, bits of water falling like "spent comets," all "blessed evangels of the mountains." These waterfalls, part of a "glorious choir" all singing loudly and low in "divine harmony."

Muir's metaphors appeal to one's hunger for divine pathos, what sights in Nature shrink us, nullify man's feeble position, and bring into view the immense harmony and beauty of a divinely conceived and maintained world.

Orson Pratt, one of the first Mormon patriarchs to enter the Salt Lake Valley, iterated a prophetic biblical pronouncement about the agricultural prospects for his new found home. From Isaiah he quotes, "the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose." This misguided mixing of metaphor (more precisely simile as metaphor, desert equals rose), illustrates one of Anne Whiston Spirn's key points. "Landscape metaphors modify perceptions, prompt ideas and actions, molding landscape, in turn" (Spirn 24).

The story of Huntsman Chemical, founded by Jon Huntsman, a direct descendent of Orson Pratt, illustrates how this incongruous landscape metaphor helped motivate this market capitalist to invent garbage that doesn't biodegrade — the styrofoam clam shell that for so many years housed eggs and Big Macs. The blossoming of Huntsman's innovations in plastics brought us the delights of products that have been linked to a variety of cancers, including the one that menaced Jon Huntsman himself. Next door to the 60 million dollar Huntsman Cancer Institute sits Huntsman Chemical's International Headquarters. Set high up along the foothills of the Wasatch Mountains, it presides over the Salt Lake Valley, that for several weeks in January, is home to the most poisonous air on the planet — equal to that of Beijing and Mumbai. We don't blame Jon Huntsman directly, but the irony of this misguided ancestral ecological pronouncement should not be overlooked.

As domesticated roses and deserts are ecologically ill equipped to tolerate one another, this declaration ignores the physical manifestation of the land and favors the religious fervor for the land. The wilderness, *as metaphor*, is given to the faithful as a place of transformation. This spiritual transformation comes as the saints toil, plant and pray over the ‘blossoming’ of foodstuffs that will support them, but will over-burden the land. Were a fledgling American Beauty rose bush to have been dropped from the heavens into this ecosystem and left to its own devices it would not have blossomed. The desert holds a different metaphor for the rose. The desert is *Hell* to a rose. “To recover and renew the language of landscape is to discover and imagine new metaphors, to tell new stories, and to create new landscapes” (Spirn 25).

The anxiety of poorly paired metaphors shows up in Rebecca Solnit’s own evaluation of a current present which is simultaneously longing for a fuzzy, unrepeatable past and looking to construct a future radically different from the now. Concerning the confined, drawn space of Yosemite, the g(u)ilt frame around the masterpiece, she says, “we are urged to take only pictures, leave only footprints,” and yet “I can’t help but feel something is sadly missing. It is nature as a place in which we do not belong. A tourist is by definition an outsider, a person who does not belong, a stranger in paradise” (Solnit 33). She cannot resist the temptation to indulge the religious metaphor, to hold it in as high esteem as the most die-hard pursuants of manifest destiny. It seems she is caught in a place between metaphor, somewhere between Arcadia and Utopia.

“Without faith in perfection and its synonyms, the natural and the pure, the need to rush forward to Utopia and Armageddon or to strain nostalgically backward to Arcadian Eden, vanishes like dew; the yearning for missing perfection which drives so

much Euro-American activity is itself missing from this picture” (37). Solnit reveals here, knowingly or not, her and everyone’s own “yearning for missing perfection” that exists in equal amounts with the nuclear physicist as it does with the peace activist protesting Columbus. For everyone there always exists a place that is better than this place. For some it exists in the future, for others the past. This dissatisfaction with the present produces an anxiety that generates myth, “pragmatic myths that prepare their audience to engage with a flawed lively present.” Solnit seems never to fully resolve this anxiety or offer suggestions for its dismissal. Using these metaphors reveals just how transient, how liminal and disorienting present evaluations of our environments can be. In the following quote we see that Solnit’s world is one of perpetual dichotomy as she struggles to find the language to convey adequately this message.

As a child living in a bowl of hills, filled with people who seemed hostile to me, I daydreamed fondly of the collapse of their world and their disappearance, cherished picture of living on alone among their ruins, or sometimes I pictured living in the landscape as it would have appeared before their appearance. The before and after their habitation seemed one and the same place. (78)

*The before and the after* are as unattainable as they are impossibly similar.

Religious metaphors of separation and reconstitution do not serve us well as we confront rapid ecological disturbances. These symbolic regimes offer no signposts to help live through change. We want giant leaps from one whole and closed system to another. Joseph Campbell outlines the problem, “A real danger exists when social institutions press on people mythological structures that no longer match their human experience” (Campbell 5). Other authors echo Campbell’s concern.

Wendell Berry recognizes the problematics of religious dualism in the equation “man = body + soul.” For Berry, this is a misreading of Christian mythology. “The Lord

God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). Berry, a man of Christian faith, sees this dualistic reading as a way for Christians to distance themselves from addressing their bodies as anything other than temporary place-holders. “ “Soul” here refers to the whole creature. Humanity is thus presented to us, in Adam, not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together but as a single mystery” (Berry 313). The dust’s the thing. Dust is a remarkable, much neglected religious metaphor that bridges the gap between body and spirit. God breathed life into dust, the dust became animate, “vibrant matter” to borrow a phrase from Jane Bennett. A body is a “single mystery.”

Alan Burdick, from his aptly titled *Out of Eden*, outlines the concerns of conservationists as they grapple with scientific language. “To understand nature, much less preserve and protect it — one must conjure the right metaphor for it. If nature is like a clockwork the tools of veterinary medicine don’t apply. If nature is a cathedral no airplane technician can fix it” (Burdick 95). What you say nature is “like” sets the blueprint for how you live, interact, preserve, change, and destroy it. Burdick chronicles the “invasion” of Guam by the brown tree snake. A place where nature “never intended it to be.” Why? What does nature intend? Why don’t we laud a creature that is as successful at exploration and resettlement as we are? Is it because a snake caused this whole mess to begin with? Because of the serpent in the Garden, bodies are fallen materialities. They were expelled from wholeness, fulfilling a plan hatched in an evil mind figured in the guise of a snake. The Christian semiotics of sin and deceit get embodied in the order *Pythonomorpha serpentes*, containing species that are as successful as any that have ever lived.

William Cronon explores a similar pitfall within supposed secular environmentalism, when wilderness, as a healing ecological metaphor, gets wrapped up into old religious ideals. “Many environmentalists who reject traditional notions of the Godhead and who regard themselves as agnostics or even atheists nonetheless express feelings tantamount to religious awe when in the presence of wilderness” (Cronon 80). If wilderness is given a religious designation, then, in Cronon’s view, we still aren’t properly addressing the dualism between body and soul that the mythic expulsion from Eden initiated. “If by definition wilderness holds no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners, enjoying their leisurely reverie in God’s natural cathedral, then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us” (81). Can we re-bridge the gap, via new ecological metaphor, between body and soul, between materiality and the semiotic constructions of the mind? Is there a pathway into new mythic structures that can more effectively address our ecological crisis? Is there a metaphoric space where transition is the permanent state?

*Queer Materialism, The Nonprocreative Body as Ecotone*

First, let us discuss what this figuration is not. I don’t attempt to define a queer body for what it actually *is* or *is not*. I am always at least one metaphor away from a universal designation. I concur with Kathryn Stockton when she suggests, “materialism stands as a ‘God’ that might be approached by fictions and faith, but never glimpsed naked. ‘Real bodies’ are what never appear” (Stockton 5). We don’t seek to define a ‘real body.’ It’s the fictions and the faith we’re after as a nonprocreative body comes more fully into view and plays a larger role in myth-making. What are the unique

consequences of relying not on religious faith-based metaphors, but metaphors attached to queer bodies, when discussing human ecology? How can new fictions, new metaphors and stories about queer bodies confront those consequences?

Can a new type of ecopoetic language, grounded in metaphors created from a queer materialism change the way we view human ecology? I look for creative constructions that enunciate material realities caught in transition, particularly those of nonprocreative queer human bodies that are repressed or denied expression by hegemonic scientific, religious, and social discourses. To explore how “matter and meaning, bodies and texts, perception and experience intra-act with cultural productions and social systems” (Opperman 465).

These new materialisms, to which *queer ecology* belongs, are emerging sites of critical focus in the field of ecocriticism. The entire issue of the Summer 2012 edition of *ISLE*, is devoted to material ecocriticism, lead by Greg Garard, Serpil Opperman, and Dana Philips. Opperman explains a key analytical component:

Their radical thesis is that in the age of environmental uncertainty, the natural and the cultural can no longer be thought of as dichotomous categories. Rather we need to theorize them together and analyze them together, and analyze their complex relationships in terms of their indivisibility and their mutual effect on one another. (462-63)

Material ecocriticism compels us to recognize the limits and the blind spots of the old deterministic, essentialist taxonomies, to think of bodies, as Donna Haraway puts it, as “material-semiotic nodes.” A queer gentlemen may carry the name Joe Harold Smith—a triptych signification referencing a lifetime of signified meanings—but he is also meat on a skeletal frame. He is a vertebrate, a primate, a great ape, and a ‘bachelor’—biologically *and* sociologically queer. He is a point of conscious, vibrating space-time



where “no priority is given to either materiality or discursivity; neither one stands outside the other” (Barard 177). He is Joe Harold Smith, Queer-Meat-Primate, *Esq.* He has a material mind made from mindful matter. A queerly parsed “material-semiotic node” that if we look closely, we uncover a body that is “living a dying,” queerly. A queer body, one that is nonprocreative, is a material actant caught up in “messy matter,” unconcerned with ghostly lineages or embodied futures. The queer body is stranger than we think and inhabits ecological realities that help us understand, as Judith Halberstam does, that “futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience, namely birth, marriage, reproduction and death” (Halberstam 2). The queer body, thought of as an *ecotone*, becomes a site where material challenges to procreation, refusals, contraceptions, abortions, mix with and change long held semiotic structures surrounding bodies — that bodies are mere material replenishment machines wholly suited for a single purpose.

### *Changing the Matter of Ecological Metaphor*

Referencing man as the creator of language, Nietzsche tells us, “this creator only designates the relation of things to men and for expressing these relations he holds to the boldest metaphors” (Nietzsche 53). The boldest of all environmental mythologies in Western civilization may be the Christian myth surrounding the Christ child. In terms of metaphor, what happened inside a virgin body matters, as that story has come to dominate so much of our ecological thinking. For believers and nonbelievers alike, many conceptual frameworks within human ecology are still tangled in the complex images of the sacred child.

Having a child saves one from mortality — literally if you're a Christian parent, figuratively for all others. *I am my child*. Eternal. Investment in dominant procreative symbolic orders becomes an investment in the survival of offspring. The systems that most easily and completely allow the child to reach a reproductively viable age are the systems parents choose. The urgency of reproductive success trumps experimentation. Parents rarely make good agents of change.

As much as a queer body is “living a dying,” it's connected to the death drive, around which a new symbolic order may organize. But, as Lee Edelman points out, this isn't about replacing one symbolic order with another.

To figure the undoing of civil society, the death drive of the dominant order, is neither to be or to become that drive; such being is not to the point. Rather, acceding to that figural position means recognizing and refusing the consequences of grounding reality in the denial of the drive. As the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering social organizations as such — on disturbing therefore and queering ourselves and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity, only ever disturb one. (23)

So an agenda behind the hunt for queer ecological metaphor is revealed. We seek metaphors of undoing, which are the metaphors that stand in opposition to those that presuppose divinity and essentialist categories. “Acceding to a figural position” is the charge we undertake. We look for a metaphor to figure the queer body as functioning in a particular way that helps us navigate ecologies in transition.

If there is a disclaimer to be made here before we entangle Lee Edelman in this discussion, it is that the future, as Edelman may or may not imagine it, is a more-than-human construct. There are surely dog futures and dolphin futures and ant futures and futures for plankton and algae, amino acids and lipids. We cannot know what nonhuman

entities are capable of were *Homo sapiens* to go extinct. We do see how unchecked human reproduction threatens many nonhuman communities. “We choose instead not to choose the child as a disciplinary image of the imaginary past or as a site of projective identification with an always impossible future” (35). Here, we veer away from Edelman’s trajectory. Contemplating the end of the world, *as we know it*, is not the end of the world entire. Instead, we throw off the imago of the Child in order to be open to infinite change. Nonprocreative consciousness anticipates an infinite number of *possible* futures, comprised of humans or not, and is filled with awe at their unpredictable, mysterious, and undecipherable natures.

Because of the economic and religious investments, the sacred child has come to dominate ethical discourse concerning what future is best. These futures rarely include queer bodies as anything other than tolerated entities lacking any vital purpose. “And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us, is this willingness to insist intransitively — to insist that the future stop here” (35). Edelman speaks as if a single group of “us,” the ethnically queer, could make that decision for the whole species, the good share of which is populated with relentlessly procreative specimens. We may not need to be the *queerest* we can be. How we qualify that in the first place seems extraordinarily problematic. But being just queer enough, just nonprocreative enough to put the skids on a run-away truck, may be of some benefit.

The issue isn’t whether we should procreate, but to ask ourselves why we procreate. “Don’t deify the category,” Haraway proclaims. The child, the human, the future, the past, the environment, Nature — queer materialism is a project to explore the removal of the definite article and the upper case from these linguistic designations. We

attempt to dial metaphors back into materialities that include the death drive, that bring environmental discourse away from religious wholeness and place process center stage. Though Edelman's polemic has a pronounced myopia, ignoring nonhuman futures, its power comes in its demand that all life histories bear the metaphoric weight of physical process. When the Child becomes an object of worship, it's turned into the subject of religious absolutism and consumer capitalism. When the American child has the carbon footprint five times that of the world average, when the child becomes a commodity, a religious sign, a niche market, a golden idol, it becomes both the original sin and the savior. To the religiously troubled, to the 'fallen' person of faith, every new human face promises a pathway that escapes an always, already troubled present materiality. But now, seen from the critical vantage point of a queer body, each new face, Christian or not, contributes to an already crowded reproductive materiality, the physical effects of which are visited upon the bodies of children through hunger, diabetes, obesity, autism, illiteracy, and a wide range of developmental diseases due to malnutrition and poverty. In part, these are material consequences of a dogmatic religious past that assumed a divinely appointed future would fix itself. Because we sense our decline, we create the spectacle of the child in whom we invest more optimism, more theatrics, and more science. We socially engineer niche markets — dedicated cable channels, clothing stores, 'family' vacation cruises, theme parks, happy meals, and plastic play places. The child becomes pollution.

Instead of constructing humans as perfected or perfect-able forms, always as subjects, as Adams, or stewards, what if we position humans as *objects caught in process*, material and semiotic contingencies able to manifest in a myriad odd and novel ways?

Modern white men and women are not the end products of a brilliant design hatched two million years ago. Modern white heterosexual couples, as *Homo sapiens*, are not done changing. In two million years they may not exist at all or they will be things unrecognizable. That future, formless *present-becoming* haunts us. It is Derrida's *arrivant*. "All experience opened to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous arrivant [...] All of history has shown that each time an event has been produced, for example in philosophy or poetry, it took the form of the unacceptable, or even of the intolerable, or the incomprehensible, that is, of a certain monstrosity" (Derrida, *Traumatism* 112). What Pleistocene mammal, the dire wolf or saber-toothed cat or short-faced bear would have imagined that their future forms would be sleeping twenty hours a day on velvet pillows, chasing red dots of laser light across hard wood floors, or scavenging peanut butter and dirty diapers out of national park garbage cans. All forms whether novel or established, whether in flux or in periods of relative stability, are just manifest moments in time and space of processes that are on going. All forms are unstable in varying degrees. They change. In Hegelian terms, forms are more than just being, they're always *becoming*.

If our environmental metaphors matter, and what we say about the world around us reflects, informs and influences our behavior, then it seems, as the major contributor to this sixth great extinction event, our environmental, subject-oriented metaphors have failed us. Western religious metaphors of the "natural world" are long overdue for a refitting.

The closer we look at the foundational myths of monotheism, the more we realize how the ethos of canonized reproductive sexuality has long trumped modern humanistic

notions that bodies are invested with material agency. Gore Vidal had this to say on the matter:

The planet is just a staging area for Heaven. Why bother to clean it up? Did not the sky-god tell his slaves to “be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it and have dominion...over every living thing that moveth upon the earth?” Well, we did just like you told us massa. We’ve used everything up. We’re ready for Heaven now. Or maybe Mars will do. (Vidal 413)

Not a timid assessment, but one that is as necessary as it is inflammatory. If the creation myth of replenishment theology is to be adaptive, it has some questions to answer regarding its conceptual formations of gender and procreativity. Where are the limits of gender? For how many more generations do we replenish?

The metaphors of Eden and the sacred child can no longer be the only viable ecological markers for life as a human virtual. We cannot materially reconstitute our bodies or ecosystems to previous, perfected states. There will be no prodigal returns, no refunds, no homecomings, and no closures. The membership of our shared biosphere is rapidly turning over. There is no prayer or magic thought that regenerates that weird primordial androgyny. What metaphor builds the bridge between Eden and extinction?

Agreement in how symbolic orders overlap may be missing the point, however, as birth and death are inevitable, and will come regardless of how we talk about it. If for some, the child is the metaphor of immortality, then a crucified Christ hanging by the wrists is the metaphor for material death. By extension, the corpse becomes the metaphor of decay and decomposition. For the material body, the goal of life is death. For a Christian spiritual body, the goal of life is resurrection. These signs live in separate symbolic systems. But what if there were no goal?

There is no meaning to the queer body. The meaning *of* the queer body is being alive. If more of us view childless mortality in terms that reject the cult of consumer capitalism, we may in turn, not only reject the production of one more, giant, carbon-footed baby, but reduce our own carbon status, reduce our own inflated view of ourselves and thus allow for all things nonhuman to come more clearly into view. Changing ecological metaphor means changing the way we view matter.

When we speak of matters of the environment what do we mean? Timothy Morton asks these questions. “What is an environment? Is there such a thing as *the environment*? Is it everything “around” us? At what point do we stop, if at all, drawing the line between *environment* and *non-environment*: The atmosphere? Earth’s gravitational field? Earth’s magnetic field” (Morton 10)? How we imagine relationship between the parts dictates how we view the whole. As part of his *dark ecology*, Morton offers *the mesh* as a metaphor which looks at individuals, what he calls *strange strangers*, as material manifestations never fully understood, but always vibrantly sensed and experienced. Matter becomes meshy.

The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully “itself.” Our encounter with other beings becomes profound. They are strangers, even intrinsically strange. Getting to know them makes them stranger. When we talk about life forms, we’re talking about *strange strangers*. (15)

Morton figures these strange strangers from Derrida’s arrivant. The mesh then is a conceptual space wherein this most intimate and radical connectivity dwindles individual identity to a single mystery. As subject selves, our relationship to ecosystems and non-human entities has been governed by rational scientific exploration and essentialism.

Environmental rhetoric is too often strongly affirmative, extraverted, and masculine; it privileges speech over writing; and it simulates immediacy (feigning

one-to-one correspondence between language and reality). It's sunny, straightforward, ableistic, holistic, hearty, and "healthy." Where does this leave negativity, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness? Are these simply nonecological categories? (16)

As strangers to ourselves and everything else, we're radically open to the surprise of discovery through interaction. The mesh as metaphor, comprised of enumerable contact points and ecotones, doesn't tell us how to act towards other entities, but rather tells us that within this enmeshment, what event disturbs one *strange stranger*, will, in some measure, disturb all others. The mesh is a metaphor for *objects caught in process*, not subjects obeying 'natural laws.' "With dark ecology we can explore all kinds of art forms as ecological: not just ones that are about lions and mountains, not just journal writing and sublimity. The ecological thought includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror" (17). We study diseases as enemies. We plot plagues on charts as we would mock-up battle plans. We wage war on life forms we deem hostile to human health. We think little of their habitats, their evolutions and pay no deference to the connections they have with us and other strange strangers. Facing how organisms violently move upon, disturb and consume one another within the radical intimacy of the mesh, unthinkable before now, threatens not just individual human identities, but the collective identity of "us" as a separate exceptional species. "Ugliness and horror are important, because they compel our compassionate coexistence to go beyond condescending pity" (17). *Tat tvam asi*. Thou are that. That is you. All things are all things. "Things will get worse before they get better, if at all. We must create frameworks for coping with a catastrophe that, from the evidence of the hysterical announcements of its imminent arrival, *has already occurred*" (17).



*The Queer Sublime*

Is it possible to imagine a queer material ethos — a lifelong meditation on non-procreativity, loss, death and decay? Is it possible to find existential comfort in decomposition, one major characteristic of an ecotone? One of the many kasinas in Samantha Buddhist meditation, focuses on the *corpse* — a new, potentially transformative ecological metaphor— the image of one's own body dumped into a ditch and decomposing. If one cannot contemplate the loss of all things, but instead only imagines a resurrected, reconstructed, celestial body, perfected and eternal, can one's conception of temporal ecosystems be anything other than controllable, determinable, reducible, or steward-able? The corpse imago situates itself inside the metaphoric ecotone of the queer body as a symbol of a material process around which a personal mythology organizes itself, not as a moral code but as an instrument of orientation. Metaphors are signs to locate our place in symbolic systems, not categories for how the world works.

Again from Joseph Campbell:

These images must point past themselves to that ultimate truth which must be told: that life does not have only one absolutely fixed meaning. These images must point past all meanings given, beyond all definitions and relationships, to that really ineffable mystery that is just the existence, the being of ourselves and of our world. If we give that mystery an exact meaning we diminish the experience of its real depth. But when a poet carries the mind into a context of meanings and then pitches it past those, one knows that marvelous rapture that comes from going past all categories of definition. Here we sense the function of metaphor that allows us to make a journey we could not otherwise make, past all categories of definition. (9)

A queer body is one that seeks a symbolic order based on its own mortality. If there is a project here, it is to provide space for myth-making that relies not on the disavowal of procreation, as we view that as inevitable, but on the meditation of images

that give metaphoric weight to mortality — death as destiny. “Your own life course is the secret cause of your death” (35).

To imagine how we might construct new, transformative eco-metaphors from a the experience of nonprocreative bodies, we turn to a story about “messy matter.” This is matter that is “for the most part radically local. It addresses the ecosystems on your skin, under your shoes, in your digestive track, and in your very cells, too” (Phillips, Sullivan 447). The construction platform for the *queer sublime* “is able to entertain questions about matter both savory and unsavory, both appetizing and disgusting, in the conviction that all kinds of matter must fall within the purview of the environmental, the ecological, and the ecocritical” (447).

The construction of this creative concept begins with an Indonesian volcano, George Bataille, and a story created by a young Victorian mistress.

In his essay “Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,” Bataille explores the importance of personal mutilation and sacrifice, personal or animal, to the human experience. When we are repulsed by or find repugnant, violent actions that cause a tearing of flesh or the eruption of bodily fluids, vomiting, the evacuation of the bowels, we experience a release. “Repugnance is only one form of the stupor caused by a horrifying eruption, by the disgorging of a force that threatens to consume” (Bataille 70). Personal debasement and a rupture of our own “personal homogeneity” is a constant threat. The desire to preempt this eruption, to take control of it and worship it, is a force that shares a kinship with Arthur Schopenhauer’s destructive sublime, that which “dwindles the individual to nothing.” Bataille tells us, “The person who sacrifices is free - free to indulge in a similar disgorging, free, continuously identifying with the victim, to

vomit his own being just as he has vomited a piece of himself, in other words to throw himself *outside of himself*" (70). Bataille's exploration resonates with Timothy Morton's "dark ecology," where Morton asks, "How about basing ecological poetics on no-self (and thus on no-nature)" (Morton 187)? This helps us reach a place of creative ecological expression "where the feelings of loneliness and separation, rather than narcissistic relationships of interconnected-ness put us in touch with a surrounding environment" (193).

Ritual human sacrifice and body mutilation are ways the human self addresses its own demise. One must experience first hand, in part through ritual, the final demise of its own personal, fleshy entity. These sacrificial acts remind us of the ultimate decay of the physical form and allow the worshiper to throw off the anxiety and the pressure of procreation. Worshipping the mutilated body of a dying Christ, reading the bloody entrails of a sacrificial lamb, or Victor Frankenstein tearing apart a female body meant as a companion and procreative partner, these are worshipful acts that venerate the most destructive aspect of the sublime. This queer sublime is antiprocreative and embraces death.

We mostly view life as it progresses naturally from youth to sexual maturity to parenthood to old age to death. Events and behaviors that disrupt our prescribed notions of a linear progression of biological events are seen as unnatural and hence queer. If man, and not God, creates life, as Victor does, that is a rupture of a *Natural* timeline. If man desires destruction and not creation, this too ruptures Nature. But what Bataille would have us believe is that *nature* is not constructed diachronically, that these eruptions, psychic or physical, exists perpetually potential, just under the surface of our skins or in

our subconscious or in the bubbling, violent, unpredictable forces of material processes. When these eruptions occur, it disrupts our perfectly ordered notions of time. Nature can consume, disrupt, dismember, and sacrifice itself at any moment. Nature seeks its own destruction. This dark ecological realization now, finally, brings us to the discussion of volcanoes.

In connection to volcanic eruptions, Bataille constructs his concept of the *Jesuve*. In this concept we see just how queer, bodily and conceptually, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is. From his essay "Solar Anus," Bataille sees "the terrestrial globe covered with volcanoes which serves as its anus" (Bataille 8). In 1815, the year before *Frankenstein* was conceived, the largest volcanic eruption in recorded history occurred in Indonesia. Tambora threw so much volcanic ash into the atmosphere that the sun was blotted out for much of the following year. Snow fell on July 4<sup>th</sup> in Philadelphia. Europe experienced the 'year without a summer.' In 1816, outside Geneva, Switzerland, Mary Shelley held up in the Villa Diodati with Percy Shelley and Lord Byron through a summer with no sunshine, enduring only violent thunderstorms and dark, cold, and wet days and nights. "Although this globe eats nothing, it often violently ejects the contents of its entrails" (Bataille 8). The villa outside Geneva suffered the effects of the earth's ejected entrails.

There is a profound causality between explosive materiality and what humans do discursively. Material eco-critics make the claim that "knowledge practices are material processes" (Opperman 465). Bataille's concept of the *Jesuve*, as it relates to the *matter* and *metaphor* of the volcano, gives us a way to conceptualize how a material manifestation becomes a semiotic sign. The term *Jesuve* is a remarkable linguist construction, one that David Farrell Krell dismantles and examines in his work

*Architecture: Ecstasies of Space, Time, and the Human Body*. “The Jesuve is not only *Jesus*, [...] but also *seve*, the sap of Dionysos; the Jesuve is both the volcano, *Vesuve*, and the goddess *Venus*; [...] it is the *je subis*, ‘I submit,’ of the French, and the *yo subo*, ‘I ascend,’ of the Spanish. And so on, into a delirious infinite” (Krell 155).

The concept of the Jesuve combines the destructive and the vulgar with the beautiful and the creative. Bataille’s description is that “bizarre noise of kisses, prolonged on the flesh, clattered across the disgusting noise of entrails” (Krell 157). That sound is shared by a kissing couple, the wet slurp of fleshy surfaces, and the sucking, sickly noise of entrails being pulled from a human cavity. Victor is engaged in the movement of entrails. He hears that “bizarre noise” and, according to Bataille, experiences a type of passion akin to that of erotic love. “The Jesuve is thus the image of an erotic movement that burglarizes the images contained in the mind, giving them the force of a scandalous eruption” (Bataille 8). The sound of Victor tearing apart the flesh of the female companion is the sound of a passionate kiss — of parted, penetrated lips, and tongues lubricated by saliva, fleshy protrusions penetrating open body cavities. Both these acts are, in essence and in mechanical process, the same. The penetrating tongue, the passionate urge to kiss, can lead to procreation, but the same penetrative impulse can be “burglarized,” recontextualized, and shipped out by the Jesuve causing a psychic eruption (in Victor’s case, the urge to dismember).

“In opposition to celestial fertility there are terrestrial disasters, the image of terrestrial love without condition, erection without escape and without rule, scandal and terror” (Bataille 9). Queer nonprocreative desire is a subversive passion, a “terrestrial love without condition,” without monogamy, without social contract, without procreative

intent, without remorse. It can be said the desire Victor and the Creature have for one another is this “opposition to celestial fertility.” There is an aversion to, an anxiety for, and a rejection of heterosexual, procreative sexuality. Their relationship ends, most definitely, as a “terrestrial disaster.” “The earth sometimes jerks off in a frenzy and everything collapses on its surface” (Bataille 8).

The Jesuve is the tense linkage between what we feel and what we *say* we feel. The Jesuve is the force surrounding the hyphen in Haraways’s material-semiotic node challenging, often violently, both material manifestations and semiotic constructions, disallowing either to simply build indefinitely upon itself without a weight or measure. At the heart of the Jesuve is the anxiety of unbridled procreation. This same anxiety lives in the heart of a nonprocreative body as well as in the metaphor of the queer ecotone.

### *Material Consequence*

The challenge for addressing queerness in an ecological sense comes from the very source that has delineated and deconstructed the definitions of human sexuality and gender and has helped us understand the exasperating limits of traditional gender and sexuality discourses. Queer theory has extended those deconstructions into scientific realms where they may not be as helpful. If gender, sexuality and bodies themselves are mainly conceptual structures created from cultural discourse and practices, and those constructions can be reworked and redefined, then there is still a danger of baby being thrown out with the bathwater once the discussion of fluid gender expressions and sexual identities have become tepid and no longer helpful. Material states push back after discourse has run its course. Bathwaters change, but how does that change baby?

The conversation between queer theory and behavioral ecology presses us to stop drawing lines in the sand, nature here, nurture there. Can we examine the queer form both as a socially deconstructing identity *and* as an ecological manifestation? How can those observations be made in a coherent way? Greg Garrard of Bath University asks what the green movement has to gain from queer theory. Going after Judith Butler as the grand dame of socially constructed sexuality and bodies he states, “without ecology, then, queer theory remains a form of social creationism” (Garrard 82). If we’ve made up who and what we are as a species, then ‘species,’ indeed all ‘categories’ are simply matters of discourse. Sexed bodies and their behaviors are figurations of our imagination. Queer theory prompts us to tell our bodies they are not what they think they are. This line of inquiry has gone a long way to show how patriarchal control of resource and reproduction has marginalized female and nonheterosexual bodies. With that examination largely accomplished, what is our next conversation? If our bodies are virtually constructed male or female, then how do we explain animate, sexed bodies engaging in very ancient, specific, and sex-differentiated behaviors? Garrard asserts that “cultural critics have not been well prepared by four decades of theoretical argument to interpret biological results fairly, carefully, and accurately” (Garrard 82). Even within queer ecology, what Garrard sees as a “new materialism,” he reads “signs of the priority of argument over evidence and the habit of discounting or simply ignoring alternative hypotheses, which have characterized the bio-phobic strands of theoretical inquiry heretofore and deepened the lamentable abyss between the two cultures ” (82). Thinking of the queer ecotone may allow the queer body room to ruminate inside this abyss.

E.O. Wilson gives us a more amenable imperative, a way to view the multiplicities of the queer body simultaneously, with one foot in each of these “two cultures.” First from a scientific vantage point, “Committed homosexuality, with the preference appearing in childhood, is heritable” (Wilson 253). The mystery of the queer human is still, as yet, largely unexamined in the field of behavioral ecology. Then here, Wilson hints at how early social constructions may have embraced early genetic mutations. “Homosexuality may give advantages to the group by special talents, unusual qualities of personality, and the specialized roles and professions it generates” (254). We see here an anthropologist, a material scientist, speaking with a forked tongue. Inside a queer body, a genetic variation, the material manifestation of non-procreativity, meets social construction. A novel form, the queer, is born into a culture wherein it creates a niche that solves a problem or causes instability against which the culture reacts. Within bodies that are strange or novel, there is always potential change because of the transitional nature of that body. The ecotone of a queer body allows for regress between material novelty and socially constructed environments. Sometimes bodies and cultures play nice and sometimes they don’t. The queer body as ecotone allows them a metaphoric space to duke it out.

### *Ecotone or Homotone?*

Queer bodies have been and continue to be identified as polluted sites within the social body, the body politic, and the body of Christ. That paradigm shifts as populations increase. Procreative bodies now are the polluting bodies, adding millions of new sets of carbon footprints onto landscapes that are pressed to the limits of their carrying



capacities. And yet sites of pollution are also sites of transformation. They decompose. They produce compost. They are energy producers. The slippage in signification denies the material-semiotic node a meaningful foothold. Just who is polluting whom?

We have no word for the nonprocreative body that hints at its ecological potential. Sterile, impotent, barren, — these are descriptions that are also prescriptive. Nothing will grow in you. You are inactive. You lack vitality. You are inanimate, dry, homogenized, colorless, and shrunken. But sites of decomposition are filled with activity. Ecotones are spaces where organic communities meet, sometimes forming symbioses, many times not. These are sites where things turn into other things. As an ecotone, living its own death, the nonprocreative body can witness, mythologize, and tell stories about lives living in tension.

The manifestos change. *We believe in the decomposition of the body of Christ. The one who sacrifices is free. I am a stranger to myself. Thou are that.* The queer body is caught in a lifetime of sacrifice around which the language of wholeness turns to the language of the ecotone. Conservation becomes resilience. Preservation becomes conciliation. Resurrection becomes decomposition. We don't change environments to fit metaphors. Metaphors arise from material manifestation within environments. "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." It is what it is. It is not 'like' anything else. A desert will never blossom like a rose. A desert will blossom like a desert. Then that desert bloom can be taken up into human imagination and turned into "myths to live by."

"What is to be done?" Donna Haraway asks, referencing Lenin's ultimate question. This question is mostly unanswerable as long as we fight over wholeness. Which Utopia do we choose? Whose Arcadia provides the best model? In queer human

ecotones, material process is always in tension with semiotic structures. Balance may not be our operative goal, but the matter of our conversations certainly is. When material consumption, land acquisition, inheritance, monocultures, and patriarchal lineages are the order of the day, social semioses follow in kind — the nuclear family, consumer capitalism, unlimited economic growth, and the deified child. To “live a dying” means there is nothing to be done. The nonprocreative body is not an agent of change, but an actant living with change. It is adaptable and radically open to process. It doesn’t hoard materialities and project their embodied values into a future existence. Nor does it rarify or guild the frames of the past. Both these notions of time are ghosts — haunting and inspiring, yes — but never immanently material.

To think of queer bodies as ecotones is to generate metaphors of transition— junction, confrontation, decomposition and transformation. The resurrected body becomes the corpse. Pollution becomes compost. The rose becomes plastic. The child becomes the funeral pyre. Stories and ideologies change. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (protecting trade secrets secures you the powers of market capitalism), becomes *The Crow and the Cigarette Butt* (material adaptation trumps moral hierarchy).

Queer theory tells us our bodies are more than what we’ve been told they are. If we’ve constructed meaning out of corsets and riding crops and limps wrists, we’re certainly capable of making metaphor from rotting fruit, masturbation and volcanoes.

The Dionysiac need not be nihilistic, but celebratory. Decay is welcomed, not buffered. Systems need relief. The nonprocreative body seeks withdrawal. It steps back from increase to stand as a witness as things turn into other things.

Because queer bodies can function metaphorically as human ecotones, they remain permanently in tension, which means the metaphors they produce will always change. But if queer bodies turn procreative and accept initiation into social structures that modify their nonprocreative-ness, then the *body-as-ecotone* disappears. Queer procreative materiality produces its own unique fetishes and commodities and Marxist critiques of class and capital come to roost inside issues of female surrogacy and the exchange of currency for babies. Staying queer keeps the vitality of adaptability alive. But if that body returns to the consumptive, conspicuous capitalism and capitalism's prescribed regenerative practices, it risks losing its unique capacity to create and house a habitat where both material manifestations and social semioses interact and negotiate ecological transformations. If the queer body turns procreative, then *ecotone* turns into *homotone* — a parking lot of material and social sameness.

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